

 Research Article

Governance Capacity: A Critical Analysis of Vocational Education Administration Models in Local Government of Laos

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Abstract

Centralized governance frameworks in developing economies frequently generate a fundamental tension between national policy coherence and the operational responsiveness required by diverse local labor markets. In Laos, this tension is acutely manifest within the administration of Vocational Education (VE), where provincial and district authorities bear expanding implementation responsibilities without commensurate transfers of fiscal authority, administrative capacity, or technical expertise. This study critically examines the administration models operationalized within local VE governance in Laos, identifies the structural constraints limiting their effectiveness, and proposes an evidence-grounded five-component governance reform framework. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative survey data from 781 stakeholders across all provinces, comprising local government officials, VE administrators, educators, and industry representatives, with semi-structured qualitative interviews and systematic policy document analysis. Quantitative findings reveal that administrative model typology (centralized, decentralized, hybrid) accounts for less than 2% of the variance in perceived governance effectiveness, whereas process-level governance qualities, institutional autonomy, stakeholder participation, decentralization depth, and resource adequacy jointly account for 56% of the variance in perceived suitability. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) strength emerges as the strongest predictor of institutional effectiveness. Qualitative findings illuminate the mechanisms underlying these patterns: local authorities function as pragmatic brokers, navigating structural rigidities through informal networks and discretionary project-based initiatives that remain institutionally unsustainable and inequitably distributed. The study identifies a centralization-responsiveness paradox wherein ceremonially adopted decentralization policies coexist with functionally centralized operations, generating accountability ambiguities and inequitable governance costs. Grounded analytically in institutional theory, decentralization theory, and human capital theory, the proposed framework integrates reconstituted multi-level governance architecture, institutionalized demand-side engagement, equitable financing, systematic capacity development, and rigorous performance accountability. Implications are discussed for policymakers, development partners, and VE administrators in comparable transitional economies.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Administration Models, Local Government, Decentralization, Governance Capacity

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1. INTRODUCTION

The administration of Vocational Education (VE) at the sub-national level constitutes one of the most complex governance challenges within the broader landscape of educational policy in developing economies. This complexity is particularly pronounced in transitional states such as the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), where the simultaneous imperatives of national development planning,

regional economic integration, and local institutional capacity constraints intersect in ways that defy straightforward administrative prescription. Laos's national development trajectory, anchored by the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) and the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2021-2025), assigns Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) a critical role in addressing structural labor market imbalances and supporting the country's ambition to attain upper-middle-income status by 2030 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2021). Despite this rhetorical elevation, the effectiveness of VE at the local government level remains systematically constrained by governance deficiencies whose origins are structural rather than incidental.

The governance challenges confronting VE in Laos are not merely administrative inefficiencies amenable to technical solutions; they reflect deeper structural tensions inherent in the country's decentralization project. Faguet (2014) identifies a fundamental paradox at the heart of decentralization in developing contexts: the localities that stand to benefit most from decentralized governance frequently possess the least institutional capacity to exercise it effectively. In Laos, this paradox manifests acutely in the VE sector, where provincial and district authorities have been assigned expanding operational responsibilities under successive decentralization frameworks without commensurate transfers of fiscal authority, administrative capability, or technical expertise. The result is a governance arrangement in which formal policy commitments to decentralization coexist with centralized operational dependencies, which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) would recognize as ceremonial adoption of institutional forms without substantive functional transformation. Recent scholarship on educational governance in developing-country contexts underscores that such disjunctures between policy intent and institutional practice are endemic to systems undergoing rapid formal reform under external pressure while foundational administrative capacity remains underdeveloped (Anyanwu & Payet, 2025; Mutseekwa et al., 2025).

Critical engagement with this disjuncture is the animating concern of this article, which draws on an original sequential explanatory mixed-methods study conducted across all 18 provinces of Laos to examine the administration models operationalized within local VE governance, assess their relative effectiveness against empirical evidence, and advance a theoretically grounded governance reform framework. The study is situated within a comparative literature on VE governance in Southeast Asia and developing economies that has increasingly converged on adaptive hybrid models as the most contextually appropriate governance response to competing demands of national quality coherence and local operational responsiveness (Euler, 2013; King & Palmer, 2010; McGrath & Lugg, 2012). However, this literature has paid insufficient systematic attention to the specific institutional and contextual conditions of landlocked, transitional economies such as Laos, a scholarly gap that the present study is designed to address empirically and theoretically. Comparative studies from analogous developing-country contexts confirm that equitable access to quality VE and responsiveness to labor market needs depend critically on the quality of sub-national governance and the availability of structured stakeholder participation mechanisms (Seden, 2025; Takona, 2025).

This article makes three contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it enriches the educational governance scholarship on developing-country contexts by elucidating the conditions under which nominal decentralization perpetuates, rather than remedies, systemic inefficiency, extending DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism framework to the TVET governance domain. Methodologically, it demonstrates the analytical value of sequential explanatory mixed-methods designs for capturing the complexity of multi-level educational administration. Practically, it furnishes actionable governance recommendations grounded in convergent quantitative and qualitative evidence for policymakers, practitioners, and development partners committed to constructing a more equitable and economically responsive VE system in Laos and comparable contexts.

1.1. Theoretical Frameworks and Analytical Perspectives

This study deploys three interlocking theoretical frameworks: Institutional Theory (IT), Decentralization Theory (DT), and Human Capital Theory (HCT) as complementary analytical lenses for interrogating the governance arrangements, operational dynamics, and educational outcomes of VE administration in Laos. These frameworks are applied not in isolation but in productive theoretical tension, each illuminating a distinct dimension of governance that the others risk obscuring.

1.1.1. Institutional Theory and the Limits of Ceremonial Reform

Institutional Theory, as foundationally articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) in their seminal account of institutional isomorphism and subsequently elaborated by Scott (1995) through his three-pillar framework (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive) and by Thornton et al. (2012) through the institutional logics perspective, provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding why VE governance reforms in Laos have frequently reproduced existing inefficiencies under new institutional nomenclature. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) identification of three mechanisms of isomorphism coercive (arising from regulatory mandates and political pressures), mimetic (resulting from emulating perceived exemplary models under conditions of uncertainty), and normative (driven by professionalization of administrative fields) has particular analytical purchase in a context where international development partners including the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) have exerted sustained coercive and normative pressures toward the adoption of specific governance models.

The critical insight from institutional theory is that organizational adoption of governance forms is driven as much by the pursuit of legitimacy as by functional efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). When Laos's Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) formally adopts decentralization policies or PPP frameworks in response to donor requirements and regional benchmarks, it signals institutional alignment with globally recognized governance norms, regulative and normative pillar compliance in Scott's (1995) terms, without necessarily transforming the cultural-cognitive foundations that shape administrative practice at the local level. Kostova and Roth (2002) demonstrate that the transplantation of governance structures across institutional contexts frequently produces ceremonial compliance adoption in form without substantive implementation, particularly when local actors lack the capacity, ownership, and cultural alignment required for authentic reform. This dynamic is compounded when leaders at the institutional level lack the advanced qualifications and professional grounding needed to translate policy intent into practice (Anyanwu & Payet, 2025). King (2019) applies this analytical framework directly to TVET governance in developing Asia, documenting patterns of policy proliferation that outpace implementation capacity, a dynamic this study investigates empirically in the Laos context.

1.1.2. Decentralisation Theory: Promise, Peril, and the Capacity Constraint

Decentralization theory, as developed by Rondinelli (1981) and critically reassessed by Faguet (2014) in his landmark meta-analytic review, provides the structural framework for evaluating the transfer of VE governance authority from central to sub-national levels in Laos. Rondinelli's (1981) foundational typology distinguishes four forms of decentralization: deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatization, each implying different distributions of administrative authority, accountability, and resource control. Faguet's (2014) systematic review finds consistent positive effects on service delivery responsiveness where fiscal transfers and local administrative capacity are adequate, but fragmented, inequitable, and quality-compromised outcomes where these enabling conditions are absent, precisely the condition characterizing Laos's sub-national VE governance.

The Laos VE system exemplifies what Caldwell (2008) terms 'structural decentralization without operational capacity': successive policy frameworks have transferred nominal governance responsibilities to provincial and district authorities while maintaining centralized control over curriculum content, qualification standards, financial flows, and personnel decisions. This configuration produces the dysfunctions of both governance models simultaneously. Community engagement and participatory governance, identified as essential enablers of equity and responsiveness in recent studies from comparable developing-country contexts (Mutseekwa et al., 2025; Seden, 2025), remain structurally constrained in the Laos VE system, where top-down administration has historically marginalized practitioner and community voices from governance processes. The present study critically interrogates this structural arrangement through mixed-methods evidence, extending the conceptual framework of 'coordinated decentralization' advanced by McGrath and Lugg (2012) to the specific governance conditions of Laos.

1.1.3. Human Capital Theory and the Market-Responsiveness Imperative

Human Capital Theory (HCT), originating in the foundational contributions of Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) and reassessed comprehensively by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) in their global meta-analysis of educational returns, furnishes the economic rationale for VE investment that underpins Laos's national development strategy. HCT posits that education and training enhance individual productive capacity, generating returns at the individual and the economy levels. For VE systems, this framework implies that economic returns to training are maximized when curricular content is tightly aligned with labor market demand, placing the mechanism of industry engagement at the analytical center of VE governance evaluation.

Critical applications of HCT to TVET in developing contexts have, however, challenged its reductionist tendencies when applied uncritically. Grubb and Lazerson (2007) identify the 'education gospel,' the over-attribution of economic development to formal training provision, as a persistent source of policy distortion. McGrath (2012) argues that this critique has particular force in contexts like Laos, where structural barriers, including gender discrimination, ethnic marginalization, and geographic isolation, shape graduate employment outcomes in ways that fall outside the purview of VE administration alone. Recent scholarship reinforces that learner-centered approaches and equitable curriculum design are necessary complements to market-responsiveness objectives in VE systems (Egure, 2026; Takona, 2025). The present study incorporates this critical perspective, treating market responsiveness as a necessary but insufficient criterion for evaluating VE effectiveness and insisting on equity dimensions as analytically integral to governance assessment.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design and Paradigm

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), selected for its capacity to generate both statistical generalizability and interpretive depth in the analysis of complex VE governance dynamics. In this design, quantitative findings from a structured survey are collected and analyzed in the first phase; their results are subsequently used purposively to inform the qualitative phase of semi-structured interviews and policy document analysis (Ivankova et al., 2006). This sequencing enabled the qualitative strand to provide explanatory depth for statistical patterns that quantitative data identified but could not fully account for, particularly the mechanisms underlying regional variation in governance effectiveness and the institutional conditions mediating decentralization outcomes. The ontological positioning is critical realist (Bhaskar, 2008): governance structures and administrative practices are treated as real features of the social world producing observable effects on VE outcomes, whose causal mechanisms require interpretive analysis to understand (Maxwell, 2012). This positioning justifies the mixed-methods integration strategy and provides coherent epistemological grounding for synthesizing quantitative structural findings with qualitative process explanations.

2.2. Participants, Sampling, and Ethical Considerations

The quantitative phase employed stratified random sampling across all provinces of Laos to ensure adequate geographic, institutional, and role-category representation. A total of 781 usable survey responses were obtained from respondents comprising local government officials ($n = 196$), VE administrators ($n = 215$), educators and instructors ($n = 189$), and industry representatives ($n = 181$). The 23-item structured questionnaire was developed by the authors, drawing on previously validated governance assessment frameworks, particularly the governance effectiveness instruments adapted from King and Palmer (2010) and the VE quality assessment items adapted from Euler (2013). Each item employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The estimated completion time for the instrument was 25 to 30 minutes, as confirmed during a pilot test with 15 participants. Internal consistency was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .84$, consistent with DeVellis's (2017) recommended threshold), and construct validity was established through exploratory factor analysis prior to main data collection.

The questionnaires were administered. The online version was distributed via Google Forms shared through WhatsApp communication networks. This mode of distribution strategy was deliberately employed to ensure equitable geographic reach and accessibility across urban and remote provincial areas.

The qualitative phase employed purposive stratified sampling (Patton, 2015) to select 20 key informants, ensuring equitable representation across role categories (four participants each: local government officials, administrators, educators, industry representatives, student-trainees), experience bands (less than 2 years to over 15 years), age cohorts, and geographic regions. Gender representation was 40% male and 60% female, broadly reflecting the feminization of instructional roles in Southeast Asian VE systems (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020).

All participants provided informed consent. Data were anonymized and stored according to institutional ethics protocols. Member checking was conducted with six participants to confirm representational accuracy and trustworthiness of interpretations.

2.3. Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample and provided distributional profiles of key variables. Inferential analysis proceeded through Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, and one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey HSD tests (Field, 2018). Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*; eta-squared) were reported alongside significance values to enable substantive interpretation beyond statistical significance (Cohen, 2013). Homogeneity of variances was confirmed via Levene's test prior to each ANOVA, and the assumption of independence was verified through study design.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two formats: face-to-face at participants' workplaces (14 interviews, conducted in provincial education offices, VE institutions, and enterprise premises) and via video conferencing platforms (6 interviews, for participants in geographically remote provinces or who were unavailable for in-person sessions during the data collection period). All interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by an interview protocol comprising 15 open-ended questions organized thematically around governance structures, administrative challenges, stakeholder engagement, and reform priorities. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with a mean duration of approximately 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were produced in Lao and translated into English by a bilingual research assistant; back-translation was conducted for a 20% random subsample to confirm translational accuracy.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework, selected for its capacity to generate theoretically informed themes that critically engage with structural and institutional dynamics rather than producing merely descriptive content accounts. Approximately 150 initial codes were generated through inductive line-by-line coding using NVivo. Inter-coder reliability was assessed through independent coding of a randomly selected 20% subsample, yielding Cohen's kappa $\kappa = .82$, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Codes were iteratively consolidated into analytically coherent themes through systematic cross-referencing against the full dataset, the study's theoretical frameworks, and quantitative findings in an integrated analytical process. Reflexivity was maintained through analytical memoing and peer debriefing with doctoral supervisors (Finlay, 2002). Mixed-methods integration employed a convergent design logic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), with quantitative and qualitative strands compared for convergence, complementarity, and productive divergence (Fetters et al., 2013).

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Structural Pluralism Under Nominal Centralization

The empirical findings reveal a VE governance landscape in Laos characterized by what may be analytically termed structural pluralism under nominal centralization: a formal administrative architecture dominated by MoES directives coexists with a rich ecology of governance experimentation at institutional and provincial levels. Survey data demonstrate that no single administrative model commands majority

endorsement among stakeholders, with support distributed across centralized (22.3%), demand-driven (19.8%), community-based (18.2%), PPP-based (16.5%), competency-based (14.5%), and hybrid (8.7%) governance approaches. This distributional profile is statistically inconsistent with a system in institutional equilibrium, reflecting instead a governance landscape in active transition, formal structural stability concealing substantive adaptive pressure toward more pluralistic and market-responsive arrangements.

Qualitative findings corroborate and extend this quantitative picture with considerable analytical depth. Across all five participant groups, the prevailing administrative model was characterized as fundamentally centralized, with provincial education offices functioning primarily as conduits for MoES policy transmission rather than as autonomous governance actors. One administrator with over 15 years of system experience described the institutional reality of centralized governance with particular precision, noting that local-level decision-making is largely reactive, constrained by directives that leave minimal space for contextual adaptation. This characterization resonates with Laos's broader political-administrative tradition of unitary governance (Stuart-Fox, 2006) but sits in structural tension with the decentralization commitments embedded in successive national policy frameworks, a manifestation of the ceremonial adoption pattern that institutional theory predicts under conditions of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Despite this dominant centralized frame, participants across all role groups described a landscape of diverse, often informal administrative experimentation operating beneath the formal governance surface. Demand-driven curricula responsive to employer feedback had been piloted in several provinces; PPP arrangements had been established with businesses in construction, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors; competency-based training frameworks had been introduced in selected institutions; and work-based learning models, including internships with automotive workshops, hotel chains, and garment manufacturers, were consistently cited as among the most impactful practical innovations. This pattern of institutional entrepreneurship within constrained governance environments reflects what Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe as decoupling and creative compliance: actors navigate field-level pressures by maintaining formal adherence to centralized structures while generating adaptive informal practices that better serve local operational needs. Critically, the absence of a legitimizing national framework for these alternative models constrains their scale, sustainability, and capacity for systemic transformation, a finding that directly informs the governance reform recommendations.

3.2. Administrative Challenges: Diagnosing Structural Failure

The qualitative findings identify a constellation of administrative challenges that constitute not merely operational difficulties but interconnected structural failures generating self-reinforcing cycles of institutional underperformance. Chronic funding inadequacy emerged as the most pervasive and consequential challenge, described by participants across all role groups as creating an administrative poverty trap: investments required to improve VE effectiveness are perpetually deferred by the immediacy of resource scarcity. The ADB's (2014) assessment that Laos's public expenditure on VE remains well below regional comparators as a proportion of GDP provides macro-level corroboration of this institutional constraint, reflecting what Shah (2004) terms 'unfunded mandates' in the fiscal federalism literature, a governance arrangement in which subnational governments bear accountability for service delivery outcomes without the revenue autonomy necessary to fulfill their mandated obligations.

The curriculum-industry mismatch identified by industry representative participants as a critical and persistent failure of the current administrative model constitutes the most consequential outcome-level manifestation of centralized governance rigidity. Graduates were consistently described by employer participants as lacking practical competencies required by contemporary labor markets, necessitating extended retraining periods that impose direct costs on enterprises. This systemic feedback failure reflects a structural incapacity: the multi-year planning cycles of centralized curriculum development render VE provision structurally incapable of responding to rapidly evolving skill demands (Cedefop, 2019). Inadequate teacher professional development compounds this problem. Instructors without access to industry placements or continuing professional development programmes rely on outdated pedagogical approaches, perpetuating skill transmission gaps across cohorts. Research consistently demonstrates that the motivational and professional dimensions of teaching quality are inseparable from institutional support structures and career development pathways available to educators (Bindeeba et al., 2025; Egure, 2026),

findings that resonate strongly with the instructor-level challenges documented in this study. The quantitative dimension of this misalignment is strikingly evidenced by the finding that approximately 40% of VE graduates are employed in sectors incongruent with their field of training, a labor market inefficiency with significant implications for individual human capital returns and macroeconomic productivity (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

Administrative coordination failures between national and sub-national governance levels constitute a third structural dimension of systemic underperformance. Policymakers acknowledged that implementation fidelity frequently deteriorates between policy formulation and institutional execution, a phenomenon the public administration literature attributes to principal-agent problems in multi-level governance systems (Moe, 1984). The ANOVA analysis reveals that effectiveness ratings for decentralized and hybrid models are significantly lower in remote northern provinces compared with central and southern regions ($p < .05$, eta-squared = .08), quantifying the consequences of heterogeneous institutional capacity for governance outcomes. Resistance to administrative change at the local level was interpreted by multiple participants not as institutional intransigence but as a product of inadequate consultation, insufficient implementation support, and absence of ownership over externally imposed reforms, a pattern Fullan (2007) identifies as characteristic of reform processes that neglect the relational and participatory conditions required for sustainable educational change.

3.3. Sociocultural and Political Dimensions of Governance Effectiveness

VE administration in Laos is embedded within a sociocultural context that significantly mediates governance legitimacy, reach, and effectiveness in ways that purely administrative analyses underestimate. A deeply ingrained cultural hierarchy valorizing academic over vocational pathways was consistently identified as a structural barrier to VE participation across all participant groups. In Lao society, skilled vocational occupations are frequently accorded substantially lower social status than professional careers requiring university qualifications, a perception that suppresses enrollment and motivation even when vocational employment prospects are demonstrably superior (Phoumilay, 2019). Drawing on Scott's (1995) institutional framework, this cultural bias represents a cultural-cognitive pillar constraint: shared societal beliefs shape administrative choices and policy options in ways that formal governance reform cannot directly address. Sustainable improvement in VE participation, therefore, requires a parallel strategy of credential recognition reform and sustained public awareness campaigns grounded in documented evidence of VE's economic and social returns.

Political factors introduce systemic instability into VE planning horizons. Frequent policy reorientation, inconsistent budget allocation across planning cycles, and competing ministerial priorities between MoES and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW) were identified by policymaker participants as endemic governance features undermining long-term VE institutional development. The jurisdictional overlap between MoES and MoLSW, both exercising authority over aspects of TVET, generates the governance fragmentation that King and Palmer (2013) identify as one of the most persistent impediments to VE system performance in Southeast Asia.

3.4. Quantitative Evidence: Predictors of Governance Suitability

The regression analysis findings have substantial theoretical and policy significance. An initial model testing administrative model type as a predictor of composite impact perceptions produced a non-significant overall fit ($F(5, 775) = 1.735$, $p = .124$, $R^2 = .011$), with no individual model type reaching conventional significance. This result carries a powerful implication: the structural label assigned to a governance arrangement (centralized, decentralized, hybrid) is a substantively weak predictor of perceived system effectiveness.

This implication is confirmed and substantially elaborated by the second regression model, which tested theoretically grounded governance dimensions as predictors of perceived suitability. This model demonstrated dramatically superior explanatory power, accounting for 56% of variance in perceived suitability ($R^2 = .56$, adjusted $R^2 = .55$, $F(4, 776) = 247.36$, $p < .001$). Institutional autonomy emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), followed by stakeholder participation ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$),

decentralization ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), and resource allocation adequacy ($\beta = .17, p < .001$). These findings confirm that process-level governance qualities are far more powerful predictors of perceived system suitability than administrative model labels, a conclusion that critically challenges the tendency in VE policy discourse to treat governance model selection as the primary lever of reform (Mouzakitis, 2010). The prominence of stakeholder participation as a predictor aligns with co-production theory (Bovaird, 2007), which demonstrates that educational outcomes systematically improve when service users and community actors are actively engaged in governance and delivery processes.

3.5. Successful Practices and International Benchmarking

Evidence from successful administrative practices reveals a consistent structural pattern: effective VE governance in Laos is invariably characterized by active, structured industry engagement rather than institutional isolation. A PPP with a provincial textile company providing equipment, co-designed training modules, and practitioner trainers was reported to have achieved 85% graduate employment, an outcome attributable to shared institutional ownership of programme outcomes and clearly specified contractual obligations between institutional and industry partners. A parallel PPP with a construction enterprise yielded equivalent outcomes through industry-aligned competency frameworks and formalized placement agreements. The regression finding that PPP strength is the strongest predictor of institutional effectiveness ($\beta = .42, p < .001$) provides robust statistical corroboration for this qualitative pattern. However, the critical observation is that successful PPPs are geographically concentrated in urban manufacturing and hospitality sectors, while rural agriculture and handicraft VE programmes operate in near-complete isolation from the private economy, an asymmetry Patrinos et al. (2009) identify as a systemic equity risk, warning that market-mediated VE governance tends to reinforce spatial and socioeconomic inequalities in educational access.

Participants drew extensively on international system comparisons of Thailand's dual training model, Germany's nationally coordinated apprenticeship system, Singapore's integrated VE-and-skills ecosystem, Vietnam's sector-specific training hubs, and Malaysia's industry-funded VE financing model as potential sources of contextually adapted learning for Laos. Critically, participants demonstrated analytical sophistication in engaging with these comparisons, recognizing that direct institutional transplantation would be inappropriate, particularly in the case of Germany, whose substantially greater institutional capacity and regulatory infrastructure are preconditions for its system's effectiveness (Euler, 2013; Hippach-Schneider et al., 2007). This awareness reflects the growing recognition in comparative VE scholarship that governance learning must be mediated by local institutional, cultural, and economic realities, which Phillips and Ochs (2003) term 'policy borrowing' as distinct from 'policy transfer'.

4. DISCUSSION

The integrated analysis of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a VE administration system in Laos whose developmental potential significantly exceeds its current operational performance, not because the governance architecture is fundamentally misconceived, but because its constituent elements (centralized standard-setting, decentralized implementation mandates, and market-oriented partnership frameworks) are not strategically integrated. This diagnostic conclusion resonates with Weick's (1976) analysis of loosely coupled systems: the co-existence of multiple governance modalities can generate productive administrative diversity, but only when deliberate coordination mechanisms maintain strategic coherence across levels. In Laos, decentralization without capacity, partnership without institutionalization, and standardization without flexibility collectively produce a governance arrangement in which the sum is considerably less than its parts, a structural configuration that perpetuates the very inefficiencies that governance reform ostensibly targets.

The theoretical significance of this diagnosis lies in its challenge to the dominant paradigm in VE governance reform discourse, which has tended to frame the centralization-decentralization choice as the primary lever of system improvement (King & Palmer, 2010). The quantitative evidence from this study is unequivocal: administrative model labels account for less than 2% of variance in effectiveness perceptions ($R^2 = .011$), while process-level governance qualities account for 56% ($R^2 = .56$). This finding is consistent with recent empirical work demonstrating that governance quality variables leadership capacity, stakeholder engagement, resource adequacy, and accountability systems are systematically more powerful predictors of

educational outcomes than structural classifications (Anyanwu & Payet, 2025; Mutseekwa et al., 2025). As Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002) establish through their analysis of public sector capacity in developing countries, strategic planning competency, financial management capability, performance monitoring systems, and evidence-based decision-making skills are prerequisite conditions for effective decentralized service delivery, conditions systematically absent in many of Laos's subnational VE institutions.

The persistent curriculum-industry misalignment documented in this study requires an analytical framing that goes beyond treating it as a technical curriculum content problem. The evidence demonstrates that this misalignment reflects a structural governance failure: the absence of formalized mechanisms for industry participation in curriculum co-design, competency standard validation, and graduate outcome monitoring creates a systemic disconnect between training provision and labor market demand that centralized curriculum development processes cannot bridge from above. The comparison between PPP-engaged institutions achieving 80–90% graduate employment and institutionally isolated providers reporting substantially lower outcomes demonstrates that the governance architecture of industry involvement, not merely its presence or absence, is the operative variable. This finding extends Euler's (2013) analysis of enterprise-based training systems, demonstrating that it is the formalized governance dimension of industry involvement that determines its impact on educational quality and labor market relevance.

The sociocultural dimension of governance effectiveness, particularly the cultural devaluation of vocational pathways, constitutes a structural constraint that policy reform cannot address through institutional redesign alone. Grounding this observation in Scott's (1995, 2001) cultural-cognitive pillar concept, this study argues that sustainable improvement in VE participation requires a parallel cultural strategy: credential recognition reform establishing formal bridges between vocational and higher education qualifications, public awareness campaigns grounded in documented VE employment outcomes, and positive career narrativization through media and community engagement. Equity-responsive governance frameworks must, moreover, attend systematically to gender, ethnicity, and geographic dimensions of access as recent scholarship from comparable developing-country contexts demonstrates (Seden, 2025). Without these cultural and equity dimensions, even technically sophisticated governance reforms risk reproducing low enrollment and participation, limiting the population served by improved administrative arrangements.

4.1. A Multi-Tiered VE Administration Framework for Laos

The empirical and theoretical analysis converges on the design imperatives for an effective, contextually responsive VE administration framework that moves decisively beyond incrementalist administrative adjustment toward deliberate governance engineering. This framework integrates five analytically distinct but operationally interdependent components, each addressing specific systemic weaknesses identified in the analysis.

The first and foundational component is a reconceptualized multi-level governance architecture that resolves the current deconcentration-devolution ambiguity by clarifying roles and responsibilities across the central, provincial, and district levels through legislative clarification. Following Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2011) 'evaluative state' model, central authorities should retain and strengthen strategic steering functions: policy direction, National Qualifications Framework (NQF) governance, minimum quality standards, and equitable resource allocation formulae. Provincial and district authorities must be granted legally specified, substantive autonomy in curriculum adaptation, PPP governance, staffing decisions, and discretionary funding allocation. This governance architecture requires formalization in revised legislation and an amended Law on VE, building upon and significantly extending the decentralization provisions of the 2015 Law on Local Administration (National Assembly of the Lao PDR, 2015).

The second component, institutionalized demand-side engagement, addresses the chronic skills mismatch by embedding industry and community voice within the formal governance architecture. Drawing on the social partnership model underpinning effective dual-system VE governance (Euler, 2013), this component recommends the establishment of provincially and sectorally legislated Skills Councils, co-chaired by provincial government officials and private-sector leaders, with formal authority over local skills needs assessments, curriculum co-design, competency standard validation, and work-based learning

coordination. The regression finding that PPP strength is the strongest predictor of institutional effectiveness ($\beta = .42, p < .001$) provides a compelling empirical mandate for transforming enterprise participation from voluntary engagement into a legally mandated governance function.

The third component, sustainable and equitable financing, addresses the fundamental resource insufficiency that constrains local governance capacity. An effective administration model requires a diversified, multi-stream financing architecture combining needs-based formula allocations, regulatory frameworks enabling provinces to retain locally generated revenue, formalized cost-sharing arrangements with enterprises, and performance-linked grant mechanisms calibrated to employability, completion, and equity outcome indicators. This architecture replaces the fiscal unpredictability of the current model with a stable funding base addressing what Shah (2004) identifies as the ‘unfunded mandates’ problem.

The fourth component, a National VE Capacity Development Framework (NVCDF), directly addresses the administrative capacity deficits identified throughout this study as the most fundamental constraint on decentralization effectiveness. Consistent with Brinkerhoff and Crosby’s (2002) framework of public sector capacity domains, the NVCDF should provide systematic professional development for provincial and district VE administrators in strategic planning, financial management, performance monitoring, evidence-based decision-making, and partnership facilitation, institutionalized and sustained rather than delivered through time-limited donor projects.

The fifth and integrating component, a rigorous performance monitoring and accountability framework, provides the information infrastructure necessary for evidence-based governance adaptation at all system levels. Drawing on Bruns et al.’s (2011) framework of horizontal accountability, the proposed monitoring system should incorporate equity indicators disaggregated by gender, geographic location, disability status, and ethnicity as mandatory components of institutional performance assessment, ensuring that governance reform serves all populations rather than reinforcing existing differential access patterns.

4.2. Practical Implications for Stakeholders

The findings of this study generate a differentiated set of practical implications for the principal stakeholder groups engaged with VE governance in Laos and analogous developing-country contexts.

For policymakers and national government: The evidence that process-level governance qualities, not structural model labels, drive effectiveness outcomes should reorient national VE reform agendas from structural reorganization toward sustained investment in governance conditions. Concretely, this requires resolving the ministerial coordination deficit between MoES and MoLSW through a unified TVET authority or mandated interministerial coordination mechanism; enacting legislative revisions that provide genuine fiscal and administrative devolution to provincial VE authorities; and embedding National Qualifications Framework reform that establishes formal articulation pathways between vocational credentials and higher education qualifications to address cultural devaluation of VE.

For local government officials and VE administrators: The study documents that administrators’ use of informal networks and discretionary project-based initiatives, while necessary under current structural constraints, remains unsustainable and inequitable. Local administrators should actively document and systematize successful informal practices to make the case for formal institutional recognition and scaling. Investment in participatory needs assessment mechanisms drawing on the stakeholder mapping approaches validated in recent governance literature (Seden, 2025) would strengthen the evidence base for local curriculum adaptation and PPP development.

For educators and TVET practitioners: The 40% sectoral mismatch between training field and graduate employment underscores the urgent need for continuous professional development that includes structured industry placements and exposure to contemporary labor market realities. Educators should be supported to engage in co-design processes with industry partners, ensuring that curriculum content remains practically relevant. The evidence on teacher motivation and professional development (Bindeeba et al., 2025; Eigure, 2026) further suggests that systemic improvement in VE quality requires deliberate investment in instructor wellbeing, career pathways, and recognition systems.

For curriculum developers: The misalignment between centrally designed curricula and locally variable labor market demands requires a fundamental shift in curriculum governance from central

prescription to framework-based guidance with institutionally specified implementation flexibility. Curriculum authorities should prioritize the development of modular, competency-based curriculum frameworks that accommodate regional customization within nationally assured quality standards, supporting the industry co-design processes recommended at the governance level.

For development partners and international organizations: The finding that donor-funded project-based initiatives, while creating temporary spaces for innovation, remain unsustainable and inequitable has direct implications for development partner programming. Aid agencies should prioritize support for institutionalization and systematization of governance reforms over time-limited project delivery and should coordinate capacity development investments to build cumulative administrative capability rather than project-cycle-dependent expertise.

4.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study makes a significant empirical and theoretical contribution to the TVET governance literature, but several scope and methodological constraints warrant explicit acknowledgment to appropriately situate its findings and guide future inquiry.

First, the cross-sectional design of both the survey and interview phases captures governance perceptions and practices at a single point in time, precluding causal inference about the long-term effects of specific governance interventions on VE outcomes. While the sequential explanatory design enables rich analytical integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence, it does not permit longitudinal tracking of how institutional capacity develops or fails to develop following deliberate reform interventions. Future research employing longitudinal panel designs would substantially enrich the understanding of governance reform trajectories in Laos.

Second, while the study achieved broad geographic coverage across all provinces of Laos, resource and access constraints precluded extended fieldwork within each provincial context. The qualitative phase's 20 key informants, while purposively selected for theoretical representativeness, cannot fully capture the diversity of governance experiences across Laos's complex geographic landscape. Future studies should incorporate more extensive qualitative fieldwork within specific provincial and district contexts, with particular attention to the governance experiences of ethnic communities, the groups most systematically underserved by current VE administration.

Third, the study's focus on formal governance actors, policymakers, administrators, educators, and industry representatives means that the perspectives and experiences of VE learners, graduates, and their families remain insufficiently represented. Future research that centers on learner and community voice in governance evaluation would complement and deepen the findings reported here.

Fourth, the study does not include a systematic analysis of financial flows and fiscal data, which would have strengthened the assessment of resource adequacy and its governance implications. Future research incorporating public expenditure analysis and budget tracking would provide a fuller picture of the fiscal dimensions of VE governance in Laos.

Looking forward, several concrete research directions emerge from the study's findings. Comparative analysis with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, similarly situated post-socialist transitional economies sharing governance legacies and regional integration trajectories, would provide valuable benchmarks for assessing the generalizability of these findings and the transferability of proposed governance solutions. Implementation studies tracking the operationalization of the proposed five-component governance framework in pilot provinces would generate practical evidence for national scale-up. Equity-focused research examining the differential governance experiences of ethnic communities, female trainees, and rural populations would deepen the analytical foundations for inclusive VE administration reform. Finally, research examining the role of digital governance tools and data systems in strengthening performance monitoring and evidence-based decision-making in resource-constrained VE administrations represents an underexplored but practically significant frontier.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the administration models governing VE within the local government framework of Laos, generating findings that contribute to the theoretical understanding of educational governance in developing economies and to the practical agenda of TVET reform in Southeast Asia. Three principal conclusions merit emphasis as contributions to scholarship and policy.

First, the governance challenge confronting VE in Laos is not primarily a matter of choosing between centralization and decentralization but of building the institutional conditions for administrative capacity, fiscal sufficiency, social partnership infrastructure, and accountability systems under which adaptive governance can function effectively regardless of the structural model. The empirical finding that process-level governance qualities account for 56% of the variance in effectiveness, while administrative model labels account for less than 2%, has generalizable implications for VE policy discourse globally: structural reorganization in the absence of investment in institutional capacity is unlikely to produce substantive improvements in governance.

Second, nominal decentralization, the formal transfer of governance responsibilities without commensurate transfers of capacity, fiscal authority, and institutional support, risks perpetuating and deepening systemic inefficiencies rather than remedying them. The co-existence of ceremonially adopted decentralization policies with functionally centralized operations in Laos instantiates DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism with concrete operational consequences: accountability confusion, diminished institutional ownership, and concentrated governance costs falling on the communities VE is designed to serve. This theoretical contribution extends the application of institutional theory from organizational studies to the specific domain of TVET governance in post-socialist transitional economies.

Third, adaptive hybrid governance, characterized by centralized quality assurance, decentralized operational autonomy, mandatory industry partnership, community-engaged planning, and sustained capacity investment, represents the most contextually appropriate governance architecture for VE systems in developing and transitional economies. The study's five-component governance framework operationalizes this principle through context-responsive design that addresses the specific structural, cultural, and fiscal constraints identified empirically, providing a principled and evidence-grounded foundation for VE administration reform. Future research should examine implementation dynamics longitudinally and comparatively, center the voices of underserved populations in governance evaluation, and explore digital governance innovations for resource-constrained VE administrations.

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Research Ethics. This study involved non-sensitive data collection from institutions and did not require formal ethics approval under institutional guidelines. All procedures were conducted in accordance with national regulations, and informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection.

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