Strengthening Higher Education Governance for Local Development: Insights from the Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation outcomes of the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036) and the governance mechanisms of Rajabhat Universities in Thailand's Upper Northern region. The research pursued three objectives: 1) to evaluate the effectiveness of administrative and governance systems in supporting local development, 2) to identify approaches for strengthening participatory and adaptive governance, and 3) to classify universities according to their local development performance across key domains. Data were collected from 177 purposively selected stakeholders—including university administrators, government officials, private-sector representatives, and community leaders—through a mixed-methods design integrating surveys, interviews, and focus-group discussions. Findings indicate that while the universities have established formal committees and strategic offices that facilitate coordination and collaboration, systemic challenges persist, particularly rigid budgetary procedures, limited project continuity, and insufficient faculty incentives. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal strong short-term outcomes in teaching integration, collaboration with local agencies, and technology transfer, but only moderate long-term impacts on household income, community well-being, and educational innovation. Governance flexibility, cross-sectoral partnerships, and continuous monitoring emerge as decisive factors influencing effectiveness. The study deepens existing knowledge by demonstrating how participatory and networked governance arrangements mediate the relationship between national policy mandates and localized development outcomes in regional universities.

Keywords: Higher education governance, Local development strategy, Rajabhat universities, Participatory governance, Thailand

Introduction

Universities worldwide are increasingly repositioned as anchor institutions in local and regional development, serving not only as centers of teaching and research but also as catalysts for social innovation and civic engagement. Recent studies emphasize that the effectiveness of universities as developmental actors depends fundamentally on the quality of their governance systems, particularly their adherence to principles of autonomy, accountability, transparency, and academic freedom (Atanaw et al., 2025; Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2022). Through sound governance, universities are better able to translate knowledge into sustainable and community-responsive practices.

In Thailand, these global debates find concrete expression in the Rajabhat University (RU) system—a nationwide network of public universities established under the Rajabhat University Act B.E. 2547 (2004) with a royal mandate to advance local development through higher education, particularly in provincial and rural areas. Today, 38 Rajabhat Universities operate across the country, distributed regionally as follows: eight in the North, five in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, three in the Central region, four in the Western region, two in the Eastern region, eleven in the Northeast, and five in the South. Collectively, they serve approximately 300,000 students nationwide (MHESI, 2024), expanding access to higher education for rural, low-income, and first-generation learners—an essential component of their mission to promote educational equity and local development.

The 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036) articulates a national vision of "University Engagement for Sustainability," identifying Rajabhat Universities as core institutional mechanisms for advancing area-based development. The Plan emphasizes four interrelated pillars—(1) local development, (2) teacher production and development, (3) educational quality enhancement, and (4) administrative reform—supported by the goal of promoting sustainable economic, social, environmental, and educational growth. Within this framework, Rajabhat Universities are expected to act as knowledge and innovation hubs for community-based development, integrating research, teaching, and outreach to strengthen local well-being and resilience (Office of the Council of Rajabhat University Presidents, 2017).

Despite this comprehensive framework, research reveals persistent inconsistencies in implementation. Saengthong et al. (2021) proposed a management model centered on community engagement and strategic planning, yet reported enduring structural and financial barriers. Similarly, Makmee et al. (2022) found that many initiatives lacked alignment with community needs, while Jitruksa et al. (2024) and Petpon & Boonyananta (2024) observed uneven institutional capacity and limited resources across regions. These studies suggest that although the Rajabhat mission is conceptually robust, it remains constrained by internal governance limitations and external systemic pressures (Jantanukul, 2024).

The Upper Northern region exemplifies these tensions. Characterized by mountainous terrain, ethnic diversity, and mixed agricultural and tourism economies, it faces complex challenges such as recurring haze and PM 2.5 pollution, fluctuating agricultural markets, and below-average household incomes. Within this context, Rajabhat Universities act as anchor institutions charged with translating national policy into localized action through research, teaching, and community engagement (Petpon & Boonyananta, 2024). Yet few studies have empirically examined how governance structures influence these universities' ability to achieve sustainable local development. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to examine how governance structures influence the effectiveness, outcomes, and sustainability of Rajabhat Universities' local development initiatives under the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036).

The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the relevant literature on higher education governance and local development policy in Thailand, followed by the methodology, findings, and discussion. The final sections present policy and operational recommendations, study limitations, and concluding reflections.

Literature Review

The idea that universities should act as drivers of regional transformation has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Early scholarship by Chatterton & Goddard (2000) emphasized universities' capacity to mobilize knowledge for local transformation, while Goddard and Vallance (2013) reframed this role as a "third mission" complementing teaching and research. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007) extended this perspective by emphasizing the territorial dimension of higher education, arguing that universities serve as catalysts for knowledge transfer, civic partnership, and innovation. More recent work has moved beyond economic perspectives to incorporate moral and civic responsibilities. Wessell (2025) introduced the notion of the "just anchor," suggesting that higher education institutions (HEIs) must act as ethical agents sustaining community resilience and responding to crises such as inequality and climate change. Rodríguez-Zurita et al. (2024) similarly argue that universities advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through transformative learning and social collaboration, while Stephens et al. (2008) conceptualize universities as change agents in sustainability transitions, requiring participatory governance and long-term institutional learning.

Across these contributions, a common insight emerges: the developmental effectiveness of universities is inseparable from the quality of their internal governance systems. Governance in higher education refers to the principles and structures guiding institutional decision-making, balancing state regulation with autonomy and innovation. Its key dimensions—accountability, transparency, autonomy, and academic freedom—directly influence institutional quality and responsiveness (Atanaw et al., 2025). Atanaw et al. (2025) demonstrated that universities with greater autonomy and academic freedom exhibit stronger educational quality, whereas excessive bureaucracy weakens performance. Similarly, Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej (2022) found that sustainable leadership, mediated by social innovation, enhances universities' sustainable performance and societal impact. Governance thus functions not merely as procedure but as a strategic mechanism linking institutional integrity with developmental outcomes.

In Thailand, the Rajabhat University (RU) system represents a localized expression of this governance–development nexus. The system comprises 38 public universities established under the Rajabhat University Act B.E. 2547 (2004) with a royal mandate to advance local development, teacher education, and social equity, particularly in rural and provincial areas. The 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036) formalizes four interrelated pillars—local development, teacher production, educational quality enhancement, and administrative reform—with the first pillar defined as the Rajabhat system's core mission (Office of the Council of Rajabhat University Presidents of Thailand, 2018; Makmee et al., 2022). The Plan articulates "sustainable local development through knowledge" as its overarching vision and directs each university to align local projects with community needs, regional strengths, and national priorities. Within this framework, Rajabhat Universities are positioned as anchor institutions bridging state strategies and grassroots development.

The Upper Northern region exemplifies these governance challenges. Rajabhat Universities here operate amid complex socio-economic and ecological conditions—mountainous terrain, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and reliance on agriculture and tourism—alongside recurring crises such as haze and forest fires. These contextual factors heighten the need for adaptive, participatory governance capable of coordinating diverse actors and

sustaining long-term partnerships. Yet, despite policy emphasis on local responsiveness, few empirical studies have examined how governance mechanisms influence these universities' ability to meet developmental objectives (Petpon & Boonyananta, 2024). Most existing studies remain descriptive rather than analytical, focusing on strategic frameworks rather than governance processes in practice. This limited empirical evidence highlights a crucial research gap.

While existing studies identify recurrent operational issues such as budget delays, coordination failures, and insufficient monitoring (Jitruksa et al., 2024; Makmee et al., 2022), they rarely interrogate whether these problems stem from deeper structural impediments in governance, including unclear accountability or constrained autonomy (Atanaw et al., 2025). Moreover, the mediating role of leadership and social innovation, shown elsewhere to enhance institutional performance (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2022), has not been explored within the Rajabhat context. Consequently, the relationship between governance design and developmental outcomes in Thailand's regional universities remains poorly understood.

This gap underscores the need for closer examination of how governance structures affect development outcomes. While prior studies have identified recurring issues such as budget delays, coordination failures, and weak monitoring (Jitruksa et al., 2024; Makmee et al., 2022), they rarely explore whether these reflect deeper structural impediments—such as unclear accountability or constrained autonomy (Atanaw et al., 2025). Moreover, the mediating role of leadership and social innovation, found elsewhere to enhance institutional performance (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2022), remains unexplored in the Rajabhat context. Consequently, the relationship between governance design and developmental outcomes in Thailand's regional universities is still poorly understood.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how governance structures shape the implementation of the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036) in three Rajabhat Universities in Northern Thailand. Specifically, it analyzes how the governance principles of autonomy, accountability, transparency, and academic freedom are applied in university decision-making and community engagement. Accordingly, the study aims to (1) monitor and evaluate the administrative mechanisms and local development outcomes of Rajabhat Universities in the Upper Northern region; (2) examine approaches for improving and developing administrative systems that facilitate local development; and (3) categorize Rajabhat Universities based on their local development performance, with emphasis on outcomes for local communities. The findings contribute empirical evidence to both national and international debates on higher education governance and offer insights into how participatory and adaptive governance can strengthen universities' developmental missions and advance Thailand's broader pursuit of equitable and sustainable regional growth.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design, specifically a parallel-database approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation. This design suited the study's objectives, combining an assessment of administrative mechanisms and performance indicators with an exploration of strategies for governance improvement. The quantitative strand captured measurable patterns in local development outcomes, while the qualitative strand provided explanatory insights from key stakeholders. Integration of both strands enhanced the robustness and validity of the findings.

Research Sites

The research was conducted at three Rajabhat Universities in the Upper Northern region of Thailand, each assigned a pseudonym for analytical clarity. University A, founded in the 1920s, is the oldest and largest of the three, with seven faculties and more than 17,000 students across urban and rural campuses. University B, established in the early 1970s, has seven faculties and approximately 11,000 students, emphasizing teacher education, agricultural innovation, and professional programs such as nursing. University C, founded in the late 1960s, operates fourteen faculties and serves over 10,000 students, combining formal degree programs with extensive short-term and lifelong learning initiatives.

These institutions were purposively selected to represent the Rajabhat system's distinctive mission as regional universities dedicated to local development, while also illustrating differences in size, history, and governance. University A exemplifies a centralized administrative model, University B has implemented participatory governance reforms, and University C applies a community-based management approach. This variation provides a comparative foundation for analyzing how governance structures influence implementation of the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036).

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling of stakeholders directly involved in or affected by Rajabhat Universities' local development initiatives. On the qualitative side, data were collected from university administrators, provincial governors or their representatives, government officials, private-sector representatives, local government leaders, and community leaders, totaling fifty-four respondents. On the quantitative side, survey data were collected from faculty members, students, and community members, yielding 123 responses. Altogether, the study engaged 177 participants, thereby capturing perspectives from both institutional and community stakeholders.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection combined documentary analysis with field research. Policy documents, official reports, and previous evaluations established the contextual foundation. Qualitative data were obtained through structured interviews, observations, and focus-group discussions. Quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale and an assessment manual comprising nineteen indicators across four dimensions: economic, social, environmental, and educational.

Data were analyzed in three stages. Documentary and qualitative data were coded inductively to identify thematic patterns and summarized in narrative form. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions), with results ranked by importance and average score. Cluster analysis was then applied to classify the universities according to their performance across the four local development domains.

Results

Objective 1: To monitor and evaluate the administrative mechanisms and local development outcomes of the Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities

The analysis combined quantitative performance indicators with qualitative insights from university administrators, faculty members, and community leaders to evaluate how governance mechanisms shape local development implementation. Overall, the results show consistently strong administrative systems across the three universities, although the depth and continuity of community impact vary considerably.

Quantitatively, the assessment of administrative mechanisms yielded high scores across all four dimensions—strategic processes, organizational structures, operational systems, and management processes (Table 1). The strongest performance appeared in collaborative and participatory practices, particularly in partnerships with local administrative organizations (mean = 4.71) and participatory community needs assessments (mean = 4.63). Promotion of personnel with local development capacity (mean = 4.57) and establishment of formal project committees (mean = 4.54) also received high ratings, indicating effective planning and coordination mechanisms.

Table 1 highlights that the highest-rated dimensions relate to participatory governance and institutional collaboration. Qualitative findings reinforce these patterns. Across all three universities, administrators emphasized that effective community projects depended on "continuous consultation with subdistrict and municipal offices" and "joint design with local farmer groups and small enterprises." At University C, both administrators and faculty highlighted that the newly established Office of Local Development Strategy had significantly improved coordination among faculties and accelerated collaboration with local agencies. Faculty members described it as "a platform that links academic and community goals more directly than before."

Table 1 Evaluation of administrative mechanisms and local development outcomes

Dimension / Outcome	Highest-rated items	Mean score	Overall level
Strategic processes	Promotion of personnel with local development capacity	4.57	High
	External collaboration (state, private, civil)	4.43	High
	Integration of teaching with community projects	4.37	High
Organizational structure	Committees for project approval/implementation	4.54	High
	Clear policies at university and faculty levels	4.46	High
	Permanent monitoring committees	4.43	High
Operational systems	Formal project proposal meetings	4.51	High
	Systematic monitoring procedures	4.46	High
	Non-duplicative planning	4.14	High
Management processes	Collaboration with local administrative organizations	4.71	Very High
	Participatory community needs assessments	4.63	Very High
	Multi-stage planning and oversight	4.37	High
Outputs	Integration of teaching/research with projects	4.43	High
	Application of interdisciplinary knowledge	3.86	Moderate–High
	Knowledge/technology transfer	3.80	Moderate–High
Outcomes	Integration of new knowledge into teaching	4.29	High
	Community changes in knowledge/attitudes/behaviors	4.03	High
	Increased community databases	3.94	Moderate–High
Impacts	Extension of academic services into research	3.60	Moderate
	Household income increase	3.17	Moderate
	New curricula based on community knowledge	2.91	Low–Moderate
	Community well-being index	2.77	Low

At University A, respondents underscored the benefits of long-standing partnerships, explaining that "the provincial governor's office often seeks university input for local projects," though several noted that limited budgetary flexibility constrains innovation. University B participants pointed to a different challenge—while administrative structures exist, "planning and monitoring happen in separate silos," resulting in duplicated reporting and reduced efficiency. Community leaders also observed that projects are "visible and useful" but often "short-lived," suggesting that the issue lies not in commitment but in continuity.

However, the data also reveal a consistent decline from process- and output-level achievements to long-term impact indicators. Immediate outputs, such as integration of teaching and research with local projects (mean = 4.43) and application of interdisciplinary knowledge (mean = 3.86), were evaluated as high. Yet, impact indicators—including household income increases (mean = 3.17), creation of community-based curricula (mean = 2.91), and overall well-being indices (mean = 2.77)—remained moderate or low. Interview data illuminate this pattern: several administrators from all three institutions explained that "project cycles are too short for visible economic change," while community leaders repeatedly mentioned that "activities often end before benefits become self-sustaining."

Across all institutions, this imbalance between short-term outputs and sustainable impact underscores the limitations of current governance arrangements. Despite well-structured committees and formal monitoring systems, qualitative feedback suggests that rigid budgeting procedures, fragmented planning, and heavy teaching workloads constrain faculty participation in long-term community initiatives. As one faculty respondent summarized, "the universities have systems for every step, but not the time or flexibility to make them last."

In summary, Objective 1 demonstrates that while the Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities possess well-organized administrative mechanisms and produce measurable short-term outcomes, they face persistent challenges in translating these processes into enduring community transformation. The gap between administrative efficiency and sustainable impact reflects governance constraints related to budget rigidity, faculty incentives, and project continuity—issues explored further under Objective 2.

Objective 2: To identify approaches for improving and developing governance structures that support local development

Building on the preceding findings, qualitative interviews, focus groups, and documentary evidence identified five interrelated approaches for strengthening the governance capacity of Rajabhat Universities in the Upper North. Triangulated perspectives from administrators, faculty, and local stakeholders converged on the need for greater flexibility, integration, and institutional incentives to sustain community impact.

The first approach concerns the redesign of project management structures to enhance flexibility. Across all three universities, administrators emphasized that rigid budget allocation and disbursement rules limit timely implementation of local development projects. Faculty participants added that the multi-step approval process often delays activities until the end of fiscal years, reducing their effectiveness. University C provides a notable counterexample, where the establishment of an Office of Local Development Strategy and Academic Services reporting directly to the President has improved responsiveness and coordination. Both administrators and faculty credited this direct reporting line with reducing bureaucratic delays, enhancing transparency, and ensuring that project approvals are based on feasibility and community needs rather than procedural compliance. The structure was widely cited by respondents as a key factor in maintaining engagement and continuity with local partners.

The second approach emphasizes the systematization of collaboration with both internal and external partners. Effective governance requires structured cooperation within the

university and with provincial agencies, local governments, and community organizations. Across all three cases, respondents referred to the "upstream–midstream–downstream" model to describe how projects should integrate design, implementation, and evaluation phases. Administrators and community leaders alike stressed that this approach would align university activities with provincial development plans and support continuous, cyclical monitoring throughout project life cycles. Provincial officials confirmed that joint planning and cross-sector coordination are essential to preventing duplication and improving resource efficiency.

The third approach involves expanding inter-university partnerships. Participants at all institutions recognized the value of collaboration between Rajabhat Universities and other higher education institutions—particularly Chiang Mai University and the University of Phayao—to strengthen academic capacity and credibility. Administrators explained that such partnerships can facilitate faculty exchange, joint research supervision, and co-hosted community projects, thereby reinforcing Rajabhat Universities' position as regional development hubs. Faculty members further noted that collaboration enhances access to specialized expertise and creates opportunities for knowledge co-production between academic and community actors.

The fourth approach centers on reforming financial governance systems. Budgetary inflexibility emerged as one of the most consistent themes across all interviews. Delays in procurement and disbursement frequently curtailed field activities and disrupted project continuity. Respondents in Universities A and B proposed the establishment of dedicated *budget-support units* or *"budget mentors"* to assist faculty in navigating financial regulations and ensure timely release of funds. Simplified procurement processes and limited authority to reallocate within approved budgets were also recommended to better align fiscal management with real field conditions and community priorities.

The fifth approach focuses on strengthening faculty incentives and academic recognition. Participants consistently reported that local development work is undervalued in workload and promotion systems. As one lecturer noted, "community projects count for service, not scholarship," a perception that discourages sustained involvement. Respondents proposed the introduction of workload credits, direct honoraria, and clearer mechanisms for converting project outcomes into scholarly outputs. Administrators concurred that integrating community engagement into evaluation criteria would embed local-development work within the academic mission.

Overall, the findings suggest that governance reform within the Rajabhat system must advance on two interconnected levels. Structurally, universities require coherent coordination, flexible budgeting, and stronger partnerships to translate strategic intent into effective practice. Culturally, they must cultivate an ethos that recognizes community engagement as integral to academic excellence. Genuine progress therefore depends on shifting governance from procedural control toward participatory and learning-oriented approaches that sustain long-term local impact.

Objective 3: To classify Rajabhat Universities in the Upper Northern region according to their local development performance

This section classifies the three Rajabhat Universities' performance in local development across four domains—economic, social, environmental, and educational—using quantitative indicators complemented by qualitative interview data. The combined evidence illustrates variation among institutions and highlights governance factors shaping their effectiveness. Table 2 presents the comparative performance scores. Across the system, the average performance was 68.78 percent (fair). Among the four domains, economic outcomes ranked highest (72.29 percent), followed by social (69.40 percent), environmental (67.45 percent), and educational (63.62 percent). The data reveals a consistent pattern: Rajabhat

Universities perform most strongly in economic and social projects but face continuing challenges in educational innovation and environmental sustainability.

Table 2 Performance of Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities in Local Development (by domain)

University (Pseudonym)	Overall Score (%)	Rating	Economic	Social	Environmental	Educational	Domain Emphasis
University A	73.70	Good	75.31	70.69	77.68	73.12	Environment & Economy
University B	64.11	Fair	69.11	66.00	58.03	57.74	Economy & Society
University C	68.53	Fair	72.45	71.52	66.64	60.00	Economy & Society
System-wide average	68.78	Fair	72.29	69.40	67.45	63.62	Economy first, then Society

University A achieved the highest overall score at 73.70 percent (good), reflecting strong institutional performance across all four domains. The environmental dimension (77.68 percent) ranked highest, followed by economic (75.31 percent), educational (73.12 percent), and social (70.69 percent).

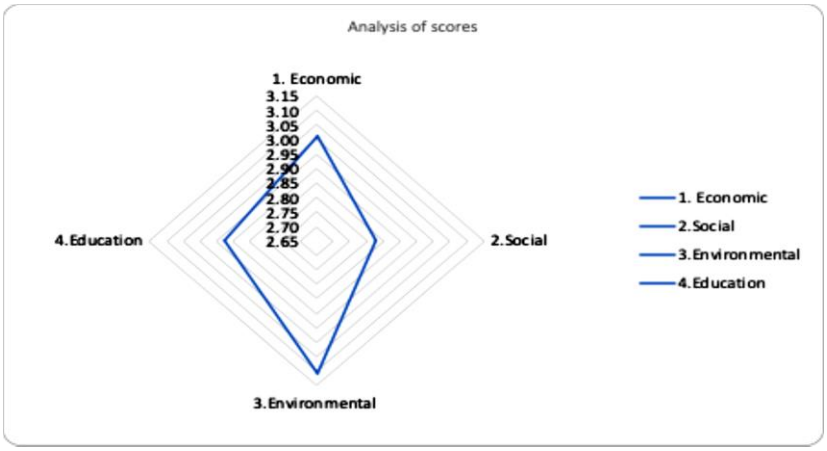


Figure 1 Performance of University A across four local development domains

Figure 1 highlights this balanced performance profile, where the university's environmental and economic initiatives reinforce one another through long-term community partnerships.

Administrators explained that these results stem from the university's integrated planning framework, combining faculty-level committees with cross-provincial coordination. One official observed that "regular consultation with provincial and subdistrict authorities allows projects to continue beyond one-year cycles." This participatory process, supported by a Local Development Strategy Committee, ensures that project priorities align with provincial sustainability plans and government funding streams. Faculty respondents further noted that environmental projects—such as watershed rehabilitation and air-quality monitoring—were embedded into teaching and student service-learning modules, helping to bridge academic and community outcomes. However, some administrators cautioned that maintaining this balance

requires continuous budget and staff support. Overall, University A demonstrates that structured coordination and sustained partnerships translate directly into stronger and more balanced performance across domains.

University B recorded an overall score of 64.11 percent (fair), with moderate strengths in economic (69.11 percent) and social (66.00 percent) dimensions, but weaker performance in environmental (58.03 percent) and educational (57.74 percent) areas.

Interview data indicated that most initiatives are short- term and output- oriented, emphasizing skills training, local entrepreneurship, and income generation. As one administrator remarked, " procurement delays make it difficult to maintain community programs once the fiscal year ends." Faculty members echoed that project outputs are rarely incorporated into curriculum design or research, with one lecturer explaining that "we create good models for farmers, but they end when funding ends." These perspectives clarify the link between lower scores in the environmental and educational domains and limited institutional mechanisms for knowledge integration.

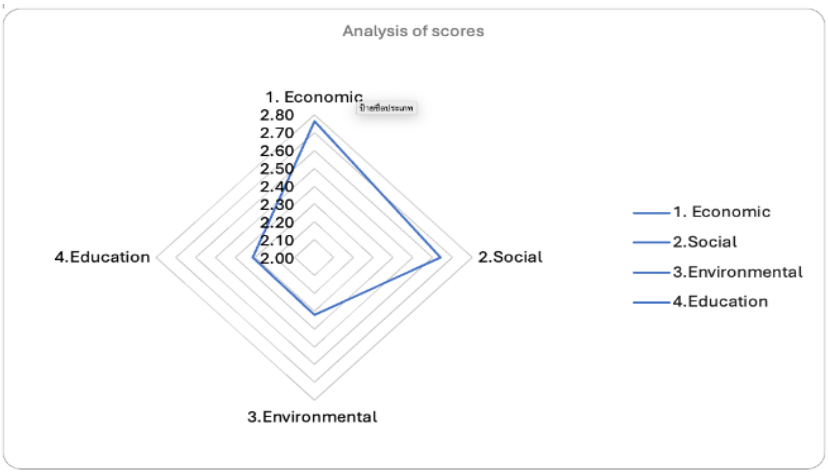


Figure 2 Performance of University B across four local development domains

Overall, University B's experience illustrates that budget rigidity and fragmented coordination constrain the university's developmental role. Strengthening fiscal flexibility, linking community projects to teaching and research, and developing cross-sector partnerships could help shift its activities from short- term productivity toward sustained local transformation.

University C achieved an overall score of 68.53 percent (fair), with notable results in the economic (72.45 percent) and social (71.52 percent) domains, and lower performance in environmental (66.64 percent) and educational (60.00 percent) areas. Figure 3 shows a performance pattern similar to University B, though with slightly higher averages across all domains.

Interview data revealed that University C's community- based economic and tourism programs—including cross- border trade initiatives and sustainable agriculture training, have produced visible local benefits. A local leader commented that "our young farmers have learned new techniques through the university's workshops and can now access better markets." However, administrators acknowledged that integration with academic planning remains limited: research, teaching, and service activities operate in parallel rather than through unified design.

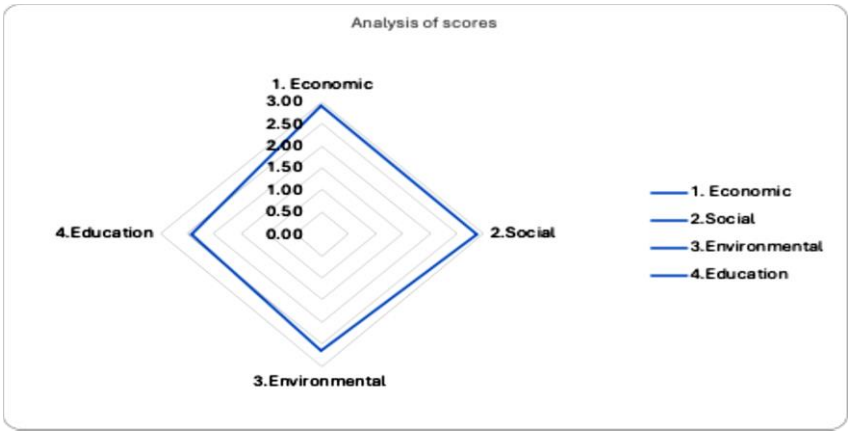


Figure 3 Performance of University C across four local development domains

Respondents agreed that the recently established Office of Local Development Strategy has improved coordination and responsiveness but still faces internal fragmentation between faculties. As one dean noted, "the office has the right vision, but projects still depend on individual champions." This partial integration helps explain the moderate overall performance: progress is visible in outreach and partnerships but less in institutional learning and curricular reform.

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 4, performance across the three universities ranged from 64.11 to 73.70 percent, averaging 68.78 percent overall, corresponding to a fair rating. Across domains, economic (72.29%) and social (69.40%) dimensions consistently outperformed environmental (67.45%) and educational (63.62%) outcomes. This pattern illustrates that Rajabhat Universities have become strong catalysts for regional economic and social improvement, while long- term educational and environmental impacts remain comparatively limited.

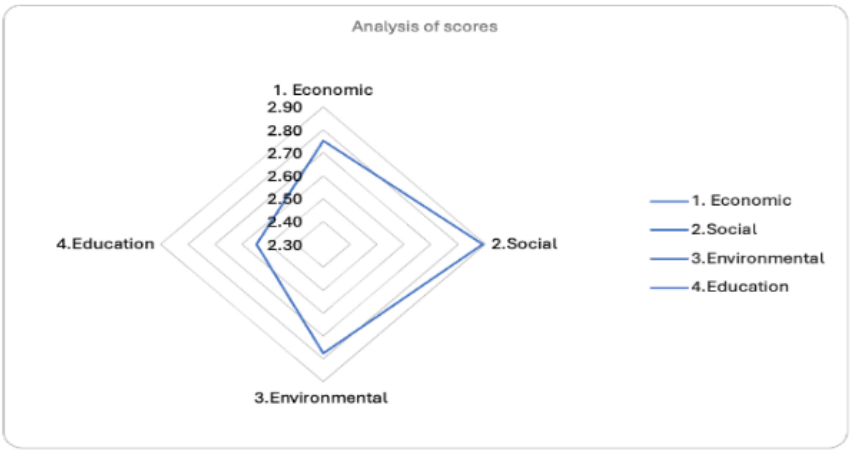


Figure 4 Comparative performance of Universities A, B, and C across four local development domains

Participants across all institutions confirmed that economic and social projects attract more political and financial support because they yield "visible and fundable results." In contrast, initiatives in curriculum reform or ecological resilience require sustained commitment and flexible funding rarely available under current regulations. Addressing these structural barriers through adaptive governance and stronger inter-university collaboration could enhance institutional capacity to generate balanced and lasting community impact.

Overall, the classification shows that the Rajabhat Universities have become effective regional drivers of economic and social development, yet continue to face barriers in achieving lasting transformation in educational and environmental domains. Their developmental performance is shaped primarily by the degree of institutional coherence, fiscal flexibility, and inter-university collaboration. Strengthening these governance capacities will be critical for enabling the Rajabhat system to evolve from short-term project implementation toward a more sustainable and inclusive model of local development.

Discussions

The findings of this study confirm that the Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities have made tangible progress in operationalizing the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036), yet persistent governance and structural challenges continue to limit their long-term impact. On the positive side, the universities have developed systematic plans across the four domains of economy, society, environment, and education, supported by clear indicators and committee-based governance systems. These mechanisms have facilitated effective outputs, including the integration of teaching and research with community projects and the generation of locally relevant knowledge. However, the evidence also reveals that these achievements remain largely short-term. Gains in household income, curriculum reform, and community well-being are modest, reflecting a broader challenge in higher education's engagement with local development—namely, that project-level success rarely translates into structural transformation (Fongwa, 2023).

These results can be interpreted within the wider global discourse on universities as anchor institutions. International research highlights that universities are increasingly expected to act as engines of regional transformation, advancing innovation, equity, and sustainability not only through academic functions but also through governance and civic partnership (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000; Goddard & Vallance, 2013; OECD, 2007). The Rajabhat experience both affirms and extends this discussion. While a strong royal mandate provides strategic direction, institutional practices—such as centralized budget control, limited autonomy, and weak faculty incentives—constrain the universities' ability to fulfill their mission. This finding is consistent with Atanaw et al. (2025), who demonstrate that excessive managerial accountability without adequate autonomy weakens institutional performance, and with Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej (2022), who show that sustainable leadership yields tangible results only when organizational systems promote social innovation.

The governance mechanisms observed in the three universities illustrate these dynamics. University C's creation of a dedicated Office of Local Development Strategy demonstrates the advantages of centralized coordination and responsiveness, whereas the more decentralized, faculty-based approaches at Universities A and B have produced fragmented planning and uneven implementation. Interview participants from University A and C emphasized that cross-faculty coordination and regular consultation with provincial authorities helped maintain project continuity, while respondents from University B pointed to duplication and delays caused by overlapping responsibilities. This variation mirrors earlier Thai research emphasizing the need for coherent governance structures and cross-institutional collaboration to sustain regional higher-education initiatives (Makmee et al., 2022; Saengthong et al., 2021). The comparative performance data further show that economic and social domains are consistently prioritized over environmental and educational outcomes—an imbalance that limits alignment with Thailand's Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such misalignment reduces opportunities for policy integration, access to BCG-related funding, and participation in international benchmarking for sustainability performance.

Another significant finding concerns the limited integration of community assets into project design and implementation. Many initiatives emphasize mobilizing economic resources—budgets, outputs, and short-term deliverables—while neglecting local knowledge, social networks, and cultural capital as developmental resources. As a result, projects often generate activity without continuity or deep social transformation. Sustainable local development, however, depends not only on financial and technical resources but also on activating these non-financial assets to strengthen community ownership and long-term resilience.

A further limitation lies in the fragmented collaboration landscape. Effective anchor institutions typically operate through dense, multi-stakeholder networks linking universities, local governments, the private sector, and civil society (Goddard & Vallance, 2013; OECD, 2019; Wessell, 2025). The Rajabhat Universities of the Upper North, by contrast, continue to rely primarily on bilateral partnerships rather than enduring collaborative alliances. This observation is consistent with Petpon & Boonyananta (2024), who attribute persistent disparities in Thai higher-education governance partly to weak inter-university coordination and limited cooperation with local agencies. Without stronger horizontal and vertical networks, Rajabhat Universities risk remaining isolated and unable to achieve systemic transformation.

Overall, the evidence underscores that while Rajabhat Universities continue to fulfill elements of their royal mandate as regional development institutions, their effectiveness remains constrained by governance weaknesses. Strengthening budgetary flexibility, embedding continuous monitoring and evaluation, incentivizing faculty engagement, and building long-term partnerships across sectors are essential steps toward sustainable impact. To address these challenges, this study proposes a Participatory Governance Framework for Sustainable Local Development, which emphasizes three interlinked principles: shared responsibility, adaptive autonomy, and networked accountability. Shared responsibility entails integrating decision-making among universities, government agencies, and community actors to ensure inclusive planning and joint ownership. Adaptive autonomy allows universities to exercise context-specific flexibility within a unified national policy framework, enabling responsiveness to diverse local conditions. Networked accountability involves establishing joint evaluation systems that balance transparency with innovation, fostering trust and continuous learning across institutional boundaries. Together, these principles offer a strategic pathway for transforming regional universities from project implementers into collaborative anchor institutions capable of generating sustained, inclusive, and locally grounded development.

Considering these findings, achieving sustainable and equitable local development requires governance reform that extends beyond administrative adjustments to encompass strategic coordination, participatory planning, and long-term partnership building. The proposed framework provides a conceptual foundation for this shift, but its practical realization depends on concrete actions at both the policy and operational levels. The next section therefore translates these conceptual insights into actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity of Rajabhat Universities to function as genuine anchor institutions—capable not only of implementing development projects but also of sustaining systemic transformation within their regions.

Conclusion and suggestions

Policy and Operational Recommendations

To translate the findings into practice, this study proposes a two- tiered set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the governance capacity of Rajabhat Universities in advancing sustainable local development. The first tier focuses on the policy level, emphasizing systemic coordination and inter-agency alignment, while the second tier addresses institutional and operational practices for effective implementation. Together, these measures would enable Rajabhat Universities to evolve from project- based implementers into enduring regional anchors of inclusive and participatory development.

At the policy level, Rajabhat Universities should deepen integration with provincial and regional development strategies. Joint planning with provincial administrations would improve resource efficiency, reduce duplication, and align university initiatives with regional and national priorities—an approach consistent with OECD (2019) guidance on place-based higher education development. Collaboration should also extend to line ministries, the private sector, and civil society through multi- stakeholder partnerships such as joint investment programs, market- access initiatives, and co- financing mechanisms with banks or development agencies. Equally important is the creation of robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Joint committees comprising university and external representatives would enhance accountability and transparency while focusing evaluation on community outcomes rather than procedural compliance. Collectively, these measures would move Rajabhat Universities beyond fragmented project management toward a coherent, sustainable model of development governance.

At the operational level, three strategic improvements are essential. First, universities should institutionalize a needs- based approach to project design by identifying genuine community priorities through participatory assessment. This would ensure that initiatives reflect real social, economic, and environmental conditions rather than administrative directives. Second, implementation should shift from an output-oriented to an impact-oriented perspective, measuring success by long- term community capacity, knowledge utilization, and improvements in livelihoods and well- being. Third, universities should adopt adaptive and context- sensitive procedures— including flexible budgeting, locally embedded project management, and inclusive stakeholder engagement—to enhance trust, minimize delays, and ensure continuity of impact.

Together, these policy and operational recommendations provide a pragmatic framework for translating participatory governance into institutional practice. By reinforcing coordination at the policy level and fostering adaptability within institutions, Rajabhat Universities can consolidate their dual identity as centers of higher learning and as regional development anchors. Through this integrated approach, they can sustain meaningful community partnerships, mobilize diverse knowledge systems, and generate transformative outcomes across the economic, social, environmental, and educational dimensions of local development.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the governance mechanisms shaping local development in the Upper Northern Rajabhat Universities, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis was confined to three institutions within a single regional cluster, which—though analytically rich—limits the generalizability of the findings across Thailand's broader Rajabhat network. Future research should adopt comparative approaches across multiple regions to capture how administrative, cultural, and socio-economic differences

influence governance effectiveness. Second, the mixed-method design emphasized descriptive and evaluative aspects; longitudinal or experimental studies could better clarify causal links between governance reforms and developmental outcomes. Third, community perspectives were represented mainly through selected interviews and secondary data. Incorporating participatory or ethnographic methods in future work would deepen understanding of how governance practices are perceived and enacted at the grassroots level. Addressing these limitations would enhance empirical depth and strengthen policy design for sustainable local development within and beyond the Rajabhat system.

Conclusion

This study examined how governance structures shape the implementation of the 20-Year Strategic Plan for Local Development (2017–2036) in three Rajabhat Universities in Northern Thailand. The findings show that while these universities have institutionalized systems for planning, coordination, and performance monitoring, enduring constraints—such as limited budget flexibility, centralized decision-making, and weak inter-organizational collaboration—continue to restrict long-term community impact. Even so, the Rajabhat Universities have advanced the integration of teaching, research, and outreach to support regional development, particularly in the economic and social domains.

Beyond Thailand, the study contributes to global debates on universities as civic and developmental institutions. It underscores that the transformative capacity of regional universities depends not only on their formal mandates but also on the integrity, adaptability, and inclusiveness of their governance systems. Strengthening participatory and networked governance can move universities beyond short-term, project-driven initiatives toward sustainable, community-centered transformation. For Thailand, this suggests that the Rajabhat system's long-standing mission of education for local development can evolve into a dynamic model of collaborative governance—linking institutional innovation with community resilience and aligning local initiatives with both national priorities and global sustainability goals.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

This study contributes to understanding higher education governance by showing that Rajabhat Universities in the Upper North have established committees, monitoring systems, and participatory projects that generate short-term benefits such as knowledge transfer, skills development, and community engagement. However, they continue to face challenges in achieving long-term transformative impacts and in fully utilizing local cultural assets for sustainable development. The findings highlight that governance design, budget flexibility, and faculty incentives are decisive factors shaping effectiveness. Strengthening participatory and networked governance systems would enable universities to translate local development initiatives into more sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

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