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NAVIGATING POLITICS, CHANGE, AND WELL-BEING IN LOCAL COLLEGES: A META-SYNTHESIS OF FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATOR NARRATIVES AS THE BASIS FOR THE REACT-KNP POLICY MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a meta-synthesis of eighteen qualitative and qual-dominant studies examining how faculty and administrators in Philippine local universities and colleges (LUCs) experience and navigate the intertwined challenges of local politics, organizational change, and well-being. Guided by PRISMA 2020 and JBI Critical Appraisal protocols, the review distilled three major themes – political influences on governance, leadership and change practices, and occupational well-being – across diverse LUC contexts from Luzon to Mindanao. From this synthesis, we derived the REACT-KNP policy model, which outlines five cyclical steps (Revisit, Empower, Adapt, Capture, Transform) underpinned by a Knowledge–Negotiation–Protection (KNP) safeguard to promote resilient and sustainable reform. Key implications include the need for multi-year LGU compacts to stabilize funding, inclusive governance structures to buffer leadership transitions, and integrated well-being supports to mitigate faculty precarity. By foregrounding lived narratives and evidence-based strategies, the study offers actionable guidance for strengthening LUC capacity and faculty resilience in decentralized higher education settings.

KEYWORDS — *Local colleges, Meta-synthesis, Organizational change, Faculty and administrator well-being, Philippines, Higher-education governance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Local universities and colleges (LUCs) were established to widen access to tertiary education and anchor programs to local development, yet decentralization and patronage politics often undercut those goals. Case studies from Mandaue City demonstrate how rival colleges arise when political control shifts, exposing the fragility of institutional mandates (Pernia, 2017). Broader reviews likewise depict uneven governance and partially formed accountability systems (Montemar, Recio, & Hecita, 2017). These pressures warrant a closer look at how local politics infiltrates daily academic life, shapes change efforts, and influences the well-being of those who teach and lead.

Faculty and administrators must continually navigate political influence that seeps into hiring, promotion, and budgeting. Ethnographic work shows that low pay, contractual precarity, and overt interference erode morale even as many instructors remain committed out of professional identity and civic duty (Collado, 2020). Presidents echo this tension: dependence on local government funds forces leaders to mix adaptive management with quiet advocacy for autonomy (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). Meanwhile, resource gaps and limited managerial latitude hamper the translation of visionary plans into practice (Cajes, 2021), and the Free Higher Education Act has amplified capacity bottlenecks in understaffed campuses (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). Still, pockets of innovation exist—academic heads who cultivate digital fluency, collaborative decision-making, and agile planning report stronger unit resilience (Reyes III, Reyes, & Selorio, 2023).

Yet these insights remain scattered. By synthesizing 18 qualitative and qual-dominant studies—spanning presidents' coping repertoires, faculty research motivation, and rural change-management barriers—this meta-analysis weaves a coherent line-of-argument connecting politics, organizational change, and well-being. The resulting evidence underpins the REACT-KNP policy model: Revisit governance foundations, Empower human capital, Adapt through evidence-informed strategies, Cultivate protected academic space, and Track well-being and performance. Grounded in lived experience, the model offers politically astute, change-oriented, and wellness-affirming guidance for Kolehiyo ng Pantukan and peer LUCs nationwide.

II. METHODS

Research Model

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis to generate "third-order" interpretations from primary qualitative findings (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). We integrated three frameworks for coherence: Walsh and Downe's (2005) seven-stage protocol (problem identification through presentation), PRISMA 2020 reporting for transparent search and screening (BMJ, 2021), and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (JBI, 2020). Together, these guided a rigorous path from raw data to the REACT-KNP policy model (Revisit, Empower, Adapt, Cultivate, Track) tailored for Kolehiyo ng Pantukan.

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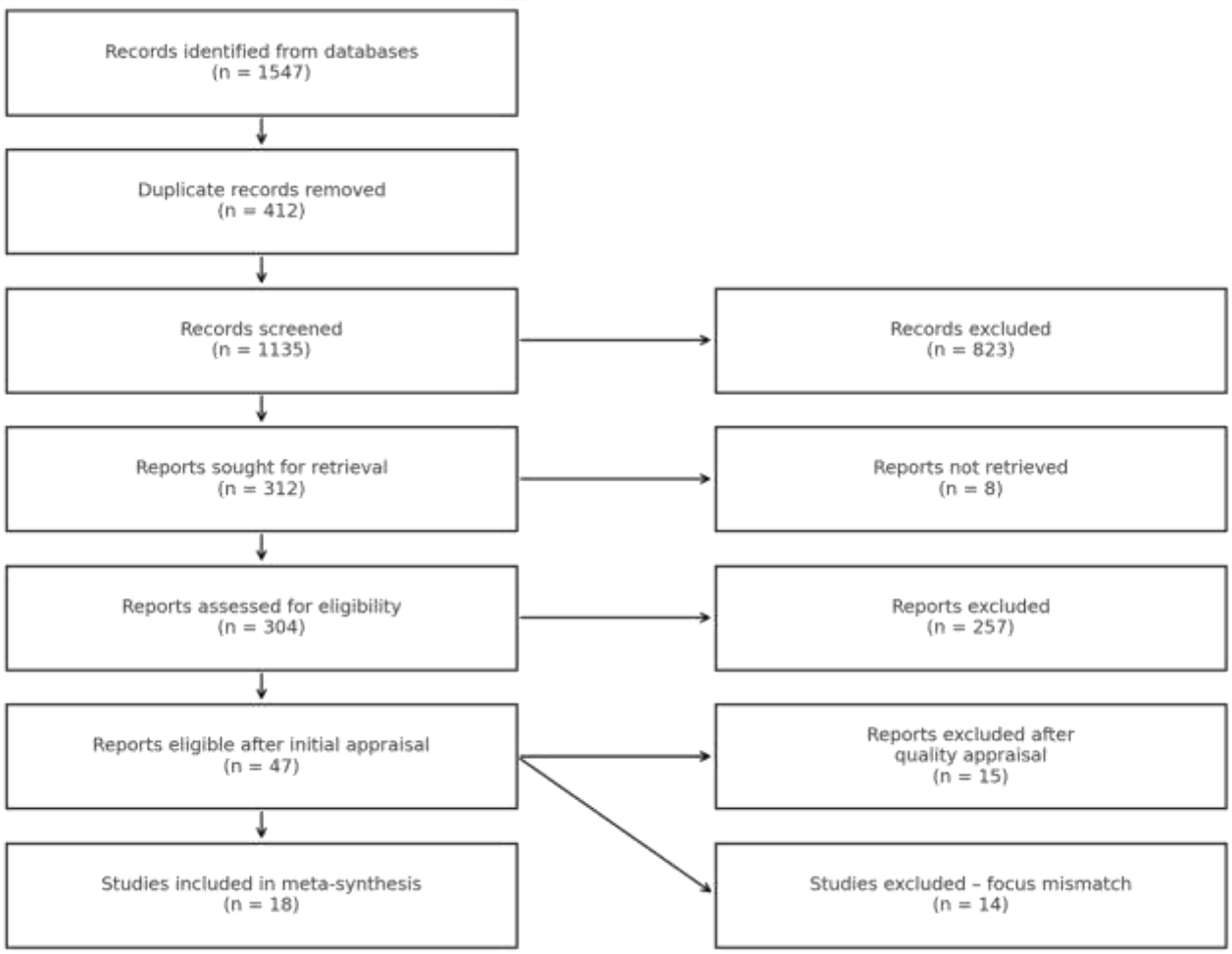


Figure 1 The flow chart of data search and extraction

Data Collection

Between 1–31 January 2025, we executed a multi-stage retrieval across ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Philippine E-Journals portal using: ("local college" OR "local university*") AND (faculty OR administrator OR leadership) AND (qualitative OR narrative OR "case study" OR phenomenology*)We adapted syntax per database, hand-searched CHED proceedings, and performed backward/forward citation tracking. After exporting to Zotero, de-duplication reduced 1,547 hits to 1,135 records. Two reviewers screened abstracts, excluding 823 irrelevant or quantitative studies. Of 312 full texts retrieved, eight were unobtainable, leaving 304. Full-text screening removed reports without empirical qualitative data, irrelevant topics, or student-only focus, yielding 47 papers. Applying the JBI checklist excluded 15 studies (<8/10 score) and a final relevance check removed 14 focused solely on student or community perspectives. The remaining 18 studies—spanning phenomenology, case studies, narrative inquiry, thematic analysis, and policy synthesis—cover Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao LUCs (Figure 1).

Table 1. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Dimension	Include	Exclude
Context	Philippine LUCs or LGU community colleges; faculty, admins, board officers	SUCs, private HEIs, basic-ed, non-Philippine settings; only students/community/industry partners
Design	Qualitative or qual-dominant mixed methods; peer-reviewed dissertations/conference papers	Pure quantitative studies or reviews without qualitative data; non-empirical essays or briefs
Topics	≥1 of: local politics; change/leadership; staff well-being; with links to governance or strategy	Curriculum, outcomes, or extension without linking to faculty politics/change/well-being; general HE policy
Dates	2010 – 31 January 2025	Before 2010 or after 31 January 2025

Data Analysis

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) thematic synthesis, all findings sections were imported into NVivo 14 and coded line-by-line by two coders. Codes were clustered via constant comparison into descriptive categories, preserving in-vivo expressions (e.g., "political seesaw," "transformative coping").

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In a second cycle, categories were translated across studies into analytic themes linking political context, change processes, and well-being. Reflexive memoing, peer debriefings, and an external dependability audit supported conceptual consolidation. Inter-coder agreement reached 92% (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020); discrepancies were resolved through consensus and disconfirming cases were sought to refine themes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Politics in Local Colleges

Politics in Local Colleges is shaped by four interlinked themes—political patronage in governance, decentralization-induced legitimacy issues, funding politics under RA 10931 and LGU discretion, and leadership instability driven by elections. These layers show how partisan dynamics affect decision-making, resource flow, and institutional continuity, impacting daily life for faculty and administrators in local Philippine colleges.

1.1 Political Patronage and Academic Governance

Seven studies highlight how patronage politics dominates governance in LUCs. Partisan ties influence hiring and promotion (Collado, 2020); executives use budgets and board seats for political rewards, sometimes spawning competing colleges (Pernia, 2017, 2018); and even technocrat-led initiatives stall when patrons exit office (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). Vision statements are compromised during annual budget re-negotiations with local councils (Cajes, 2021; Gamboa, 2022). Weak oversight from CHED allows these patterns to continue (Montemar et al., 2017). Post-election leadership changes disrupt programs, research, and infrastructure, while faculty endure unstable roles but remain committed to local youth (Collado, 2020; Cajes, 2021). Employers and families also doubt the reliability of credentials linked to political bargaining (Pernia, 2017).

These findings align with Southeast Asian and Latin American research warning that decentralization without strong accountability increases elite control and weakens faculty morale and productivity (Bernasconi, 2018; Welch, 2022; Levy, 2019). In the Philippines, political patronage not only distorts structure but seeps into academic culture, linking governance to local electoral cycles.

1.2 Decentralisation and Legitimacy

Six studies show that devolving higher-education authority to LGUs has led to legitimacy issues. In Mandaue, successive mayors founded rival colleges, blurring legal identity (Pernia, 2017, 2018). In Bohol, shifting administrations caused frequent renaming, merging, or funding cuts (Cajes, 2021). The Free Higher Education Act added confusion as students flocked to colleges offering immediate tuition subsidies (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). These rivalries dilute institutional branding, hamper planning (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025), and correlate with lower governance and research scores (Gamboa, 2022). Disputes over institutional ownership delay accreditation (Montemar et al., 2017), and fragmented legitimacy erodes public trust.

Comparative studies confirm that weak coordination in decentralized systems often triggers institutional duplication, straining academic quality and resource efficiency (Levy, 2016; Bernasconi & Celis, 2018). The Philippine "dual-college" pattern reflects global trends but also intensifies local governance and quality challenges amid access expansion.

1.3 Funding Politics under RA 10931 and LGU Control

Seven studies reveal a fiscal paradox: RA 10931 boosts enrollments but lacks assured funding, leaving LUCs at the mercy of shifting LGU priorities. In Bohol, faculty development and repairs are trimmed due to political shifts (Cajes, 2021); in Mandaue, rival colleges share limited LGU funds, causing incomplete projects and low salaries (Pernia, 2017). Delayed reimbursements worsen the issue—one campus was called "a free school with no free electricity" (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). Scarce funds are redirected to façade projects for election appeal, while essential upgrades are neglected (Pocaan et al., 2023). Governance improves with stable, predictable transfers, not larger budgets (Gamboa, 2022), and without long-term compacts, strategic plans remain unfulfilled (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025). Policy limits on internal revenue use compound dependence on LGUs and reimbursements (Montemar et al., 2017).

Globally, similar patterns exist where local authorities fund universities without guaranteed income, leading to erratic investments (Salmi, 2020; Weidman & Tadepalli, 2021). Free tuition reforms in Latin America also reveal that expanded access without matching funds harms quality (Bernasconi, 2019). Philippine funding politics thus emerge as a central governance concern.

1.4 Leadership and Electoral Cycles

Seven studies confirm that executive roles in LUCs are vulnerable to electoral turnover. Faculty describe each mayoral change as a time of "existential uncertainty," with loyal deans replacing meritorious leaders (Collado, 2020). In 2013, Mandaue's elections resulted in two rival colleges due to political shifts (Pernia, 2017, 2018). Presidents are removed or defunded when patrons lose power, and those who remain often water down priorities for survival (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). One college revised its vision thrice in six years but implemented few plans (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025). Frequent leadership turnover also led to weak follow-through on audits (Gamboa, 2022). Analysts trace this instability to the absence of fixed-term, search-based appointments—a safeguard present in state universities (Montemar et al., 2017).

International evidence echoes this: politicized appointments erode institutional memory, cause policy volatility, and shift focus toward short-term, visible gains (Salmi, 2020; Teferra, 2019). Leadership science shows that rapid, politically driven changes reduce morale and hinder sustainable reforms (Bolden et al., 2019). Leadership vulnerability in LUCs thus mirrors broader governance challenges in decentralized education systems.

2. Organisational Change and Leadership

Findings coalesce around how local colleges manage both planned and emergent change, and how leadership either

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enables or constrains institutional adaptability. Four interlinked areas emerge: transformative leadership competencies, use of strategic planning frameworks, research culture as a lever for change, and crisis-response mechanisms tested by COVID-19. Together, these themes trace the link between leadership mindsets, management tools, and organizational resilience.

2.1 Transformative / Visionary Leadership Competencies

Seven studies depict visionary leadership as essential for navigating political turbulence and scarce resources. Presidents adopt adaptive-transformative stances—framing constraints as innovation openings and promoting collaboration (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). Academic leaders embrace digital fluency and shared governance to support high-performance agendas (Reyes III et al., 2023). In rural areas, leaders using the REACT cycle—Revisit, Empower, Adapt, Capture, Transform—earn high staff ratings (Pocaan et al., 2023). Participatory visioning shields institutions from leadership turnover and sustains continuity (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025). Data from Region XI show teacher creativity thrives when aligned with a clear, innovation-driven mission (Micaroz & Laya, 2025). Even under political pressure, deans who project forward-thinking narratives revive faculty morale (Collado, 2020). Quantitatively, campuses with strong governance score high when leadership pairs planning with stakeholder engagement (Gamboa, 2022). Yet visioning faces limits—resource gaps, procurement hurdles, and shifting political winds often stall implementation (Reyes III et al., 2023; Pocaan et al., 2023).

These findings echo leadership literature linking vision, support, and stimulation to innovation and commitment (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Research on decentralized systems stresses ambidextrous strategies—balancing innovation and stability—as key to resilience (Bolden et al., 2019). This synthesis confirms that in politicized contexts like Philippine LUCs, visionary leadership serves both performance and protective functions.

2.2 Strategic Planning and Change-Management Frameworks

Seven studies show LUCs increasingly rely on tools like REACT, SWOT, and ISA audits to drive reform, though political shifts test their endurance. In rural colleges, REACT clears initial hurdles before targeting deeper change (Pocaan et al., 2023), while a large SWOT session in Aklan incorporated contingency plans for budget shocks (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025). Gap analyses exposed mismatches between visions and budgets, prompting more realistic plans (Cajes, 2021; Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). Scholars stress embedding local plans within CHED's ISA for multi-year LGU alignment (Montemar et al., 2017). However, Mandaue cases reveal that even detailed strategies can unravel under new political leadership (Pernia, 2017, 2018). Thus, frameworks must balance structured design with built-in flexibility to adapt when priorities shift.

These insights align with global scholarship on strategic tools as mediators between professional goals and political contexts. Models like Kotter's change process and Bryson's strategy cycle highlight the need for early wins and adaptive planning. Evidence from Latin America and Africa supports this, showing that plans survive when backed by legal or coalition-based protection (Salmi, 2020; Teferra, 2019). Philippine cases expand this literature, showing that success depends as much on political craftsmanship as technical planning.

2.3 Building Research Culture and Capability

Seven studies position research development as central to organizational renewal. In CAMANAVA, promotions and funding now hinge on publications, where "research numbers speak louder than politics" (Mauricio, 2023). Still, faculty face gaps in methods and writing, often doing research off-hours due to teaching loads and no sabbaticals (Cajes, 2021; Villaflores & Astorga, 2023). To bridge this, Tagoloan College ran a year-long program combining audits, training, mentorship, and seed grants, doubling research-active staff (Quiño-Justol & Gomez, 2025). Rural colleges wove research coaching into REACT plans (Pocaan et al., 2023), and Region XI grants embedded action-research for teaching and scholarship (Micaroz & Laya, 2025). LUCs with ethics boards and protected research budgets scored higher in governance and partnerships (Gamboa, 2022), showing that structured infrastructure—not motivation alone—drives sustainable scholarship.

This mirrors international findings that universities strengthen resilience by shifting from teaching-only to inquiry-driven models. Mentoring, protected time, and internal grants raise research output and enhance learning (Brew & Lucas, 2020). The scholarship-of-teaching movement also links research to agile pedagogy (Hutchings, 2019). Philippine examples show that research capability isn't just aspirational—it stabilizes institutions amid fiscal and political uncertainty.

2.4 Crisis Response and Resilience

Seven studies portray LUCs as adaptively resilient. During COVID-19, Gordon College quickly shifted to modular and LMS delivery, while Zambales campuses set up hot-lines, webinars, and LGU-supported referrals (Mendoza & Asio, 2021; Ebro & Mantillas, 2024). Financial officers repurposed earnings and donations to manage RA 10931 delays (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). Institutions used REACT to avoid burnout, sequencing response priorities (Pocaan et al., 2023), while Bohol LUCs rewrote vision statements to include disaster clauses post-typhoon (Cajes, 2021). Faculty and leaders also developed "political reading" skills and service-based narratives to sustain programs despite instability (Pernia, 2017; Collado, 2020). Quantitatively, colleges with formal crisis protocols posted stronger governance and student-support scores (Gamboa, 2022), showing that structured resilience—not reactive effort—is key in fragile contexts.

Globally, resilience includes tech agility, psychological safety, and flexible governance (Brew & Lucas, 2020; Salmi, 2020). Pandemic studies show that decentralized institutions with flexible funds and shared decision-making bounced back faster (Hodges et al., 2021). Disaster-preparedness research also confirms that codified plans and staff care reduce attrition and student loss (Welch, 2022). Philippine LUCs exemplify how weaving crisis-readiness into everyday strategy builds resilience amid political volatility.

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3. Faculty and Administrator Well-Being

This cluster focuses on the lived realities of faculty and leaders in local colleges. Four recurring themes emerge: job insecurity and resilient professional commitment; workload and career development barriers; the patchy state of mental-health support; and the role of engagement and creativity in sustaining well-being. These findings shift attention from governance to the human experience within Philippine LUCs.

3.1 Employment Status, Job Security, and Professional Commitment

Eight studies reveal employment precarity as the dominant reality in LUCs. Even regular faculty feel insecure, with contracts likened to "renewable IOUs" tied to electoral cycles (Collado, 2020). COS teachers, excluded from benefits and grants, remain despite anxiety because teaching offers meaning and career prospects (Dioquino et al., 2024). Presidents themselves face job loss after elections, with instability cascading down the institution (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). Payroll delays linked to RA 10931 further erode morale (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024), while benefits and professional growth are cut during budget shortfalls (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025; Pocaan et al., 2023). Quantitative audits confirm: colleges with many non-regular staff score low on welfare metrics (Gamboa, 2022). In Mandaue, dual-college conflicts heighten insecurity as recognition hinges on political outcomes (Pernia, 2017).

Despite this, strong professional commitment endures. Faculty view teaching as a moral obligation to local youth (Collado, 2020), and COS lecturers describe their work as part of their identity (Dioquino et al., 2024). Even presidents continue reforms despite job risks (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021). In rural areas, solidarity helps soften the impact of precarity (Pocaan et al., 2023). Still, commitment has limits: repeated lapses triggered 28% turnover in one study (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025).

These patterns reflect global findings on precarious academic labor—where intrinsic motivation sustains short-term performance but cannot prevent burnout or exits without stable employment (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Bernasconi, 2019). In Philippine LUCs, job insecurity is deeply intertwined with governance politics and fiscal unpredictability.

3.2 Workload, Research Expectations, and Career Barriers

Across eight studies, faculty report heavy workloads—24–30 teaching hours, extension tasks, and committee duties—leaving research to off-hours (Villaflores & Astorga, 2023). At Tagoloan, time pressure was the top predictor of low research output (Quiño-Justol & Gomez, 2025). CAMANAVA's quotas without release time make scholarship feel like "voluntary overtime" (Mauricio, 2023). Even where creativity is high, pilots often stall because "classes come first" (Micaroz & Laya, 2025). Rural staff are pulled into IT roles during digitalization, further straining capacity (Pocaan et al., 2023).

Career development faces hurdles: graduate study is underfunded or frozen due to low political returns (Belandres & Cristobal, 2021; Cajes, 2021), and COS lecturers lack access to travel grants and sabbaticals (Dioquino et al., 2024). The result is a contradiction: LUCs aspire to research-driven quality but remain oriented toward volume teaching.

Globally, similar patterns emerge in under-resourced systems. Latin American municipal colleges show how teaching loads and limited grants curb research and doctoral training (Bernasconi, 2019). Sub-Saharan data confirm that underfunded mandates stretch faculty thin (Teferra, 2021). In the Philippines, budget cycles and employment instability intensify this work regime, limiting both well-being and institutional growth.

3.3 Mental-Health Supports and Psychosocial Safety Nets

Seven studies show mental-health services in LUCs are patchy and politicized. Programmes exist in name, but counsellors are stretched across campuses, increasing wait times (Ebro & Mantillas, 2024). During COVID-19, online counselling was limited by trust issues and weak follow-up (Mendoza & Asio, 2021), while informal peer support remained the default (Collado, 2020). Enrolment spikes overwhelmed guidance offices, with untrained advisers handling anxiety cases (Dagohoy & Lagura, 2024). Precarious staff report exclusion from wellness events and describe mental strain from insecure contracts (Dioquino et al., 2024). In rural areas, budgets favor visible projects over counselling (Pocaan et al., 2023), and mindfulness activities often miss faculty due to grading overload (Villaflores & Astorga, 2023). Overall, support systems remain fragmented and least accessible to those in greatest need.

These findings align with global evidence that mental-health initiatives work best when fully integrated into institutional policy and resources (Hobson & Sharma, 2022). Counsellor shortages and stigma reduce uptake elsewhere too (Bernasconi, 2019; Teferra, 2021). In LUCs, political and fiscal volatility compounds these gaps, leaving many to manage stress alone—undermining both personal well-being and institutional stability.

3.4 Engagement, Creativity, and Innovation as Well-Being Drivers

Seven studies highlight how engagement in teaching, research, and problem-solving supports well-being. In Region XI, high academic freedom and work engagement correlate with strong innovation scores and lower burnout (Micaroz & Laya, 2025). Metro Manila leaders say shared decisions and digital experimentation boost morale even amid tight budgets (Reyes III et al., 2023). In CAMANAVA, mentoring and seed grants enhance job satisfaction (Mauricio, 2023), while Tagoloan faculty reported that skills workshops revived classroom passion (Quiño-Justol & Gomez, 2025). Rural REACT projects also served as purposeful mental-health breaks (Pocaan et al., 2023). Aklan's tourism-related programs helped reignite staff creativity (Biray & Delos Santos, 2025). Engagement, then, is not just motivational—it is strategic.

These results echo organizational psychology's Job Demands–Resources model, where job engagement and creativity buffer stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Global studies link inquiry-friendly environments to lower emotional exhaustion and

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greater faculty retention (Robinson et al., 2022). Philippine cases affirm that when institutions invest in creative work, they build both morale and resilience amid instability.

4.The REACT-KNP Policy Model

The diagram outlines a five-step cyclical framework—Revisit → Empower → Adapt → Capture → Transform—all supported by a central KNP Safeguard (Knowledge–Negotiation–Protection) that reinforces each phase.

It begins with Revisit, where local colleges periodically update their mission, vision, and priorities in response to shifting community needs, funding trends, or legislative mandates (e.g., free tuition). Next is Empower, which builds capacity through professional development, participatory governance, and decentralized decision-making. Small pilot grants and curriculum initiatives enable faculty and administrators to lead change, even amid uncertainty.

The Adapt phase activates flexible response mechanisms like reallocation committees or contingency funds to redirect resources during disruptions (e.g., delayed reimbursements or enrollment surges). Strategic plans include trigger points, allowing timely adjustments while keeping long-term goals in focus. During Revisit, Empower, and Adapt, the KNP Safeguard ensures actions are evidence-based, aligned with LGU negotiations, and protected by formal agreements.

In Capture, lessons from tested interventions are logged into a shared institutional memory (e.g., an "After Action" repository), helping prevent repetition and strengthening continuity. Finally, Transform consolidates proven practices into lasting reforms—such as revised evaluation tools, budget formulas, or bylaws—embedding them into regular operations. The surrounding KNP Safeguard reinforces the cycle by anchoring it in rigorous data (Knowledge), stakeholder consensus (Negotiation), and formal protections (Protection), enabling local colleges to sustain ongoing, adaptive improvement.

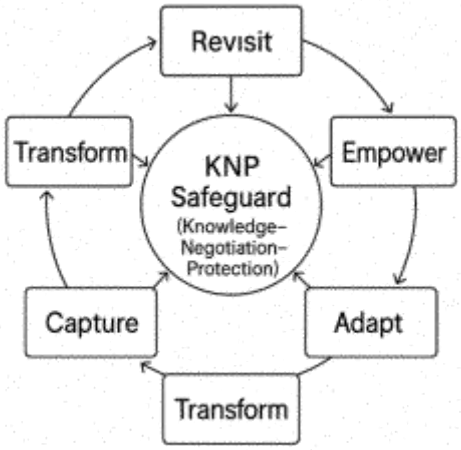


Figure 2 The REACT-KNP Policy Framework Derived from the Meta-Synthesis of Included Studies.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A synthesis of 18 qualitative and qual-dominant studies reveals that politics, organizational change, and well-being are deeply intertwined in Philippine local universities and colleges (LUCs). Three key directives emerge for practitioners:

First, governing bodies must be partially shielded from political cycles through fixed terms, search committees, and binding transition protocols to preserve strategic continuity beyond elections. Second, change tools like REACT, SWOT, and ISA are only effective when backed by stable, multi-year LGU compacts that guarantee operating and research funds; without them, plans devolve into annual wish-lists. Third, well-being support must shift from fragmented hot-lines to integrated systems that include protected research time, reduced teaching loads, and accessible mental health services for all faculty. Embedding these can transform strong but strained staff commitment into sustained performance gains.

Theoretically, this review expands three literatures. It deepens decentralization theory by showing that funding predictability, not just control, mediates the impact of patronage on governance and research. It refines transformational leadership frameworks by adding a political craftsmanship dimension, showing that visionary leadership only reduces burnout when leaders build legitimacy across factions and secure resource buffers (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Finally, it links the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018) with resilience studies, demonstrating how creativity and engagement function as both personal buffers and institutional assets during crises.

In sum, politics, leadership, and well-being must be analyzed together, not in isolation. LUCs exist in a paradox—they broaden access to higher education while remaining vulnerable to the political forces that sustain them. Addressing this is not only a governance challenge but also an ethical obligation tied to both staff welfare and student outcomes.

Future research should explore hybrid governance models—such as CHED–LGU co-funding or bipartisan oversight—and assess their long-term effects on leadership stability, research culture, and faculty well-being. By centering the lived experiences of educators, this meta-synthesis offers practical

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levers and a unifying lens for scholars investigating the political dynamics of change in decentralized education systems.

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