

# DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES OF OPERATIONAL COMPETENCY FOR ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF IN NANNING UNIVERSITY\*

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## Abstract

The objectives of this research were: (1) to study the operational competency level of administrative staff and (2) to study the development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University. The sample group was 140 administrative staff at Nanning University. Additionally, the research conducted interviews with 5 administrative staff holding leadership positions within the institution. The research instruments included questionnaires and interviews. Data analysis by using percentage, mean, standard deviation, and content analysis. The research results found that: (1) The operational competency level of administrative staff in five aspects was at a high level. Considering the results from the highest to the lowest mean were as follows: the highest mean was communication skills, followed by teamwork skills, and technical skills, followed by professional knowledge, respectively, and Innovative skills was the lowest mean, and (2) the guidelines for enhancing operational competency of administrative staff at Nanning University have multiple approaches as follows: 1) Professional knowledge, strengthened through

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systematic and tiered training, digital learning support, job rotation, and developed through institutional innovation support systems, practice 4) Technical skills, improved by position-based competency standards, targeted digital training, practical application, and micro-certification systems. 5) Teamwork skills, reinforced through project-based collaboration, cross-departmental exchange, digital collaboration tools, and incentive and recognition mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Development guidelines, operational competency, administrative staff

## Introduction

As China enters a new phase of building an education powerhouse, the modernization of higher education administration systems has become an integral part of the national strategy. The "Construction Plan for an Education Powerhouse (2024-2035)" explicitly requires "improving the education governance system and enhancing the professionalism of administrative teams" (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2024). The document particularly emphasizes that university administrators, as key executors of the education governance system, directly influence the realization of national goals to "build world-class talent hubs and innovation centers." The Ministry of Education's 2023 "Digital Education Strategy Action Guidelines" further specifies new competency standards, including "data literacy and collaborative management skills" for administrative staff in the digital era (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2023). In recent years, the Chinese government has been placing increasing emphasis on the development of higher education institutions (HEIs) as a means to drive national progress and innovation. The theoretical underpinning of this policy is rooted in the belief that a well-managed administrative system is crucial for the overall performance and innovation capacity of HEIs. Operational competency, therefore, is seen as a key factor in achieving these goals, as it encompasses the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for administrative staff

to effectively support the core missions of teaching, research, and community service. Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region has actively responded to national policies. Its "Guangxi Education Modernization 2035 Implementation Plan" prioritizes "enhancing digital transformation capabilities of university administrative" (Guangxi Education Department, 2023). At the regional level, Guangxi has been actively aligning its educational policies with national directives to promote the development of local universities. The local government has introduced specific measures to enhance the operational efficiency of administrative staff in universities, recognizing that a competent administrative workforce is essential for improving the quality of education and research. These measures include the implementation of training programs, the establishment of performance evaluation systems, and the encouragement of professional development opportunities for administrative personnel. The context in Guangxi is further shaped by the region's unique cultural and economic characteristics, which necessitate a tailored approach to operational competency development that is responsive to local needs and challenges. Nanning University, as a key institution in Guangxi, has been striving to enhance its operational competency to support its strategic goals. However, several challenges have been identified in the current administrative support system. These include a lack of systematic training for administrative staff, an outdated performance evaluation mechanism that does not adequately reflect the complexity of administrative tasks, and a limited focus on continuous professional development. Additionally, the university faces issues related to the integration of administrative functions with academic and research activities, which sometimes results in inefficiencies and a lack of alignment with the institution's broader objectives. Addressing these challenges is crucial for Nanning University to achieve its vision of becoming a leading institution in the region.

In conclusion, the development of operational competency guidelines for administrative staff at Nanning University is of paramount importance. It aligns with national and regional policies aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education institutions. By addressing the identified challenges, such as inadequate training and outdated evaluation systems, the university can significantly improve its administrative support structure. This, in turn, will contribute to a more cohesive and productive academic environment, ultimately enhancing the institution's capacity for innovation and excellence. The study aims to provide actionable recommendations that will not only address current deficiencies but also lay the foundation for sustainable development and continuous improvement in the operational capabilities of Nanning University administrative staff.

## Objectives

1. To study the operational competency level of administrative staff at Nanning University.
2. To study the development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University.

## Literature Review

**Theory of operational competency:** McClelland's Competency Theory (1973) argues that effective job performance is determined by underlying characteristics such as motives, traits, knowledge, and skills rather than by intelligence alone. This perspective provides a performance-based foundation for assessing operational competency in higher education administration, emphasizing observable work behaviors and task effectiveness. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) complements this view by explaining how motivational conditions influence individuals' willingness to develop and apply competencies.

In university administration, the fulfillment of needs for security, recognition, and self-actualization supports sustained engagement and professional growth. Integrating these perspectives, operational competency is understood as the interaction between performance-related attributes and motivational conditions. Under the context of governance modernization and digital transformation, competency development extends beyond individual capability to include organizational support and adaptive capacity, thereby linking classical competency theory with contemporary higher education governance reform.

**Concept of operational competency:** According to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council (2019), China's Education Modernization 2035 provides a national-level framework for the modernization of education governance, emphasizing the professionalization of university administrative teams and the enhancement of service awareness, governance capacity, and comprehensive operational competency. This policy highlights that administrative staff competency is a critical foundation for improving institutional efficiency and supporting the modernization of higher education governance. In addition, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council (2018) further reinforced this direction through the Implementation Plan for Accelerating the Modernization of Education (2018–2022), calling on higher education institutions to optimize administrative and service processes, strengthen systematic training for administrative personnel, and promote the integration of information technology with university management practices. Together, these policy documents establish a clear policy rationale for competency-oriented development of administrative staff, particularly in response to digital transformation and increasing organizational complexity in higher education institutions. And 2) Academic conceptualization of operational competency: Recent studies conceptualize operational competency as a multidimensional construct

integrating knowledge, skills, and abilities that support effective job performance and organizational goals (Campion et al., 2011). In the context of higher education administration, operational competency is understood to encompass professional knowledge, communication, teamwork, innovation, and technical proficiency, particularly in response to organizational complexity and digital transformation (Hu Yanling et al., 2023; Yao Yitian et al., 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that communication and teamwork are core competencies influencing administrative efficiency and service quality, while technical competency—especially digital skills—has become increasingly critical under smart governance systems. Although innovative competency is often relatively weaker, it is widely recognized as strategically important for adapting to policy reforms and optimizing administrative processes (Ou Lei, 2022; Chen Meixia, 2024).

In summary, drawing on existing literature and the practical context of university administration, this study conceptualizes operational competency as comprising five core dimensions: professional knowledge, communication skills, innovative skills, technical skills, and teamwork skills, which serve as the analytical foundation for the study.

## Methodology

**Population and Sample Group:** The population of this research was 216 administrative staff of Nanning University. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table (1970), the sample group of this research was 140 administrative staff at Nanning University. The sample was selected using stratified random sampling followed by simple random sampling.

**Research Instruments:** This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, utilizing questionnaires and interviews as the primary research instruments. All responses are provided freely based on actual circumstances and will be used

solely for statistical analysis, with no public disclosure. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential.

**Questionnaires:** The questionnaire items were developed based on literature review and policy documents related to operational competency in higher education administration. The questionnaire consists of the following two parts: The first section collects basic demographic information of the respondents, classified by gender, age, educational background, and work experience. The second section employed a five-point Likert scale to assess the current situation of operational competency of administrative staff at Nanning University. Based on the conceptual framework of this study, the scale consisted of five dimensions: 1) Professional Knowledge, 2) Communication skills, 3) Innovative skills, 4) Technical skills, and 5) Teamwork skills. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the index of objective congruence (IOC) of the questionnaire was examined by three experts, the IOC of questionnaire was 0.67-1.00, and through the distribution and collection of 30 questionnaires, a test was conducted, resulting in the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire being 0.962. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the five dimensions ranged from 0.86 to 0.91, indicating satisfactory internal consistency for each competency dimension.

**Interviews:** The first part is the Introduction of background information. The second part includes a series of open-ended interviews. The interview aimed to collect the respondents' opinions on the guidelines for enhancing operational competency of administrative staff. A total of 5 experts were selected as interviewees and selected based on strict screening criteria as follows: 1) At least 10 years of experience in university administration; 2) graduated with master's degree or above; 3) Leadership position in university administration.

## Data Collection

**Questionnaires:** The data collection for objective 1: To examine the operational competency level of administrative staff at Nanning University. The instrument was distributed to 140 administrative staff at Nanning University. Participants were given a 15-day period to complete and return the questionnaire. Upon receipt, all responses were checked for completeness, and 140 valid questionnaires were obtained, yielding a response rate of 100%.

**Interviews:** The data collection for objective 2 aimed to propose development guidelines for operational competency among administrative staff at Nanning University. Structured interviews were conducted with five experts from Nanning University. The interviews were carried out either face-to-face or online, depending on the availability of the participants, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

## Data Analysis

**Questionnaires:** The personal information of the respondents was analyzed by frequency and percentage, classified by gender, age, educational background, and work experience. The current situation of operational competency of administrative staff in five aspects, the data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The data interpretation for average value is based on Rensis Likert (1932). The data interpretation is as follows: 4.50-5.00 refers to the highest level, 3.50-4.49 refers to high level, 2.50-3.49 refers to medium level, 1.50-2.49 refers to low level, and 1.00-1.49 refers to the lowest level.

**Interviews:** The structured interview about the development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University was analyzed by content analysis.

## Results

**Objective 1: To study the operational competency level of administrative staff at Nanning University.**

A total of 140 questionnaires were included in the analysis, all of which were valid. The sample size met the requirements for subsequent statistical analysis. The results related to the operational competency level of administrative staff at Nanning University are presented based on the analysis of the collected data.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics of Operational Competency Dimensions (n = 140)

	Operational competency for administrative staff	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Level	Ranking
1	Professional knowledge	3.87	0.92	high	4
2	Communication skills	3.91	0.90	high	1
3	Innovative skills	3.84	0.86	high	5
4	Technical skills	3.88	0.87	high	3
5	Teamwork skills	3.89	0.85	high	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>high</b>	

According to Table 1, it was found that the operational competency level of administrative staff in five aspects was at a high level ( $\bar{X}=3.88$ , S.D.=0.88). Considering the results from the highest to the lowest mean were as follows: the highest mean was Communication skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.91$ , S.D.=0.90), followed by Teamwork skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.89$ , S.D.=0.85), and Technical skills ( $\bar{X}=3.88$ , S.D.=0.87), followed by Professional Knowledge ( $\bar{X} =3.87$ , S.D.=0.92), respectively, and Innovative skills was the lowest mean ( $\bar{X}=3.84$ , S.D.=0.86).

**Objective 2: To study the development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University.**

Five experts from Nanning University were interviewed using a structured protocol. Interview data were analyzed through content analysis. Open coding was first conducted to identify key statements related to competency development, followed by thematic grouping of recurring concepts. Similar codes were consolidated into five higher-level themes aligned with the competency framework. The analysis generated five themes: 1) Professional knowledge, Experts emphasized the need for systematic and tiered training systems. One expert noted, “Administrative staff need continuous learning platforms and job rotation opportunities to broaden their practical understanding of institutional policies.” 2) Communication skills, Interviewees highlighted the importance of structured communication training and standardized procedures. As one expert stated, “Clear communication protocols can significantly reduce inter-departmental misunderstandings.” 3) Innovative skills, Innovation was perceived as constrained by procedural rigidity. Experts suggested establishing innovation platforms and integrating incentives into evaluation systems. One interviewee remarked, “Without institutional support and recognition, innovation remains difficult to sustain.” 4) Technical skills, Participants stressed the importance of position-based digital competency standards and targeted technical training. 5) Teamwork skills, Project-based collaboration and cross-departmental exchange were repeatedly emphasized. An expert explained, “Collaborative projects create shared responsibility and improve coordination efficiency.”

## **Discussion**

The researcher summarizes the discussion into two parts, details as follows:

**Objective1: To study the operational competency level of administrative staff at Nanning University.**

The operational competency level of administrative staff in five aspects was at a high level. Considering the results from the highest to the lowest mean were as follows: the highest mean was Communication skills, followed by Teamwork skills, and technical skills, followed by Professional Knowledge, respectively, Innovative skills was the lowest. This pattern reflects the service-oriented and coordination-intensive nature of university administrative work, which requires frequent interaction across departments and stakeholders, thereby strengthening communication and teamwork through daily practice. The relatively high level of technical skills is associated with the widespread application of digital administration systems, which has increased familiarity with technical tools. Professional knowledge remains strong due to routine engagement with regulations and policies, although practical application tends to be emphasized over systematic theoretical development. In contrast, innovative skills are comparatively weaker, likely due to standardized procedures, strict operational norms, and limited autonomy for experimentation in administrative roles. These findings are consistent with existing research showing that communication and teamwork are core competencies influencing coordination efficiency and service quality in higher education administration (Hu Yanling et al., 2023). The relatively high level of technical skills also aligns with studies highlighting the growing importance of digital competencies under smart governance systems (Ou Lei, 2022). Nevertheless, prior research emphasizes that innovation competency remains essential for adapting to governance reform and organizational change, indicating considerable room for further development in this dimension (Chen Meixia, 2024; Zhou Yan & Wang Yu, 2024). Similar conclusions have also been reported in studies indicating that the development of operational competency among university administrative staff is deeply

embedded in routine administrative practices and institutional contexts (Feng Han, 2020).

**Objective2: To study the development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University.**

The development guidelines of operational competency for administrative staff at Nanning University adopt a multidimensional approach, as outlined below: 1) Professional knowledge, it is necessary to establish systematic and tiered training mechanisms, supported by digital learning platforms and job rotation, and to strengthen assessment and incentive systems to promote continuous knowledge updating and practical integration. 2) Communication skills, emphasis should be placed on structured training, scenario-based practice, standardized communication processes, and feedback mechanisms to enhance communication effectiveness across departments and stakeholder groups. 3) Innovative skills, structured innovation support mechanisms should be developed, including innovation training, practice platforms, benchmarking activities, and the integration of innovation capability into evaluation and incentive systems. 4) Technical skills, a position-based technical competency standard system should be established, combined with targeted digital training, practical application exercises, and micro-certification systems to support digital administration. 5) Teamwork skills should be strengthened through project-based collaboration, cross-departmental exchange, digital collaboration tools, and incentive and recognition mechanisms to enhance coordination efficiency and organizational cohesion. These development guidelines are consistent with recent studies emphasizing competency-based administrative development frameworks in higher education, which highlight the alignment of individual competencies with organizational goals and performance-oriented management systems (Propianto & Suroso, 2021). Specifically, communication and teamwork are identified as core competencies that directly influence coordination efficiency, service responsiveness, and cross-departmental collaboration in university

administration (Hu Yanling et al., 2023). In addition, innovation support mechanisms—such as innovation platforms, benchmarking activities, and incentive integration—are regarded as essential for promoting governance modernization and adaptive administrative practices (Zhou Yan & Wang Yu, 2024). Furthermore, the development of digital and technical competencies is increasingly emphasized under smart governance frameworks, as administrative effectiveness is closely linked to the ability to apply digital tools and information systems in daily operations (Ou Lei, 2022).

**Theoretical Implications:** This study advances competency theory by situating it within the governance modernization context of higher education. The findings reveal that operational competency development is shaped by the interplay between individual attributes and organizational structures, rather than by personal factors alone. Accordingly, competency is reconceptualized as a governance-embedded construct—one that is not merely indicative of individual performance but also reflective of the institutional environments in which administrative work is organized and motivated.

## Recommendation

**For Universities:** Universities should establish a competency-oriented and sustainable development mechanism to support administrative staff development by aligning structured training, evaluation, and incentive systems with core competency dimensions, while leveraging digital platforms and a collaborative, innovation-supportive culture to advance modern university governance.

**For Administrative Leaders:** Administrative leaders should provide strategic guidance by translating institutional policies into clear competency standards and performance expectations, supporting staff development through supervision and feedback, and promoting cross-departmental collaboration and

project-based practice to enhance initiative, innovation, and problem-solving capacity.

For Administrative Staff: Administrative staff should pursue proactive and continuous professional development by strengthening lifelong learning, updating professional knowledge, enhancing communication, teamwork, and technical skills, and effectively using digital tools, while cultivating an innovative mindset to improve adaptability and work performance.

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