

Strengthening Strategies for Institutional Readiness of Public Universities in the Transformation toward Public Service Agency Status: A Case Study of PTN X

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Date Entered:

18 October 2025

Date Revised:

01 November 2025

Date Accepted:

08 November 2025

Keywords: *Institutional Readiness; BLU Transformation; Vocational Higher Education; Governance; Financial Management.*

How to cite (APA 6th style)

Andriani, W., Zahara, Yentifa, A., Herman, L.A., Septriani, Y., Angriani, R. (2025). Strengthening Strategies for Institutional Readiness of Public Universities in the Transformation toward Public Service Agency Status: A Case Study of PTN X. *Jurnal Eksplorasi Akuntansi (JEA)*, 7 (4), 1798-1808.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24036/jea.v7i4.3878>

Abstract

This study was carried out to understand how PTN X prepares itself to become a Public Service Agency (Badan Layanan Umum or BLU). Research on this topic is still limited, especially in the context of vocational higher education, even though the transformation toward BLU has a big impact on how institutions manage their finances, governance, and human resources. The purpose of this study is to describe PTN X current level of readiness and to identify strategies that can strengthen its institutional capacity in facing the BLU transition. The study used a qualitative descriptive approach involving 15 key informants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document review, and analyzed thematically to capture the main issues and strategies emerging from the transformation process. The results show that PTN X is partly ready for BLU implementation. Progress has been made in governance and planning systems, but some weaknesses remain, such as limited coordination between units, dependence on government funding, and incomplete digital integration. Leadership commitment and clear policies play a key role in maintaining progress, although bureaucratic procedures still slow down flexibility and innovation. In general, this study concludes that PTN X readiness can be strengthened through better coordination, improved financial independence, digital integration, and continuous staff development. The findings also highlight that BLU transformation is not just about meeting regulations but about changing the institutional mindset to be more adaptive and accountable. The results are expected to give insight to policymakers and other vocational institutions that are preparing for the same transition.



INTRODUCTION

The policy transformation of Indonesian public universities (Perguruan Tinggi Negeri, PTN) into Public Service Agency universities (Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Badan Layanan Umum, PTN-BLU) is a strategic national reform for the sake of more autonomy and efficiency, as well as better accountability in the higher education sector. By Government Regulation No. 23/2005 concerning Public Service Agency Management (as revised by Government Regulation No. 74/2012), the Indonesian government is giving PTNs more financial autonomy and providing opportunities to establish non-tax revenue generation services. In doing so, the reform is said to enhance institutional competition, financial stability and world-class academic performance (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2023).

But executing that policy has its own difficulties. Many of the newly converted universities as BLU still perform high dependency on state budget, limited managerial capability and not fully applying good university governance principles (Fatmawati & Suharto, 2024; Sulila, 2021). These pressures were exacerbated in the post-pandemic as higher education institutions were compelled to speed up digital transformation and support financial autonomy in a time of economic instability (Nurlatifah et al., 2021). Locally, PTN X has been working to enhance institutional readiness for the optimization of BLU status in order that it can improve academic quality, financial autonomy, and global standing. This need has been exacerbated with the guidance received from the Ministry of Finance through its 2023 Public Service Agency Reform policy for universities to establish KPIs as a way to remain accountable and exercise financial autonomy.

According to the *New Public Management* (NPM) perspective, public sector organizations including higher education institutions must adopt private sector principles such as efficiency, accountability, and performance orientation to enhance institutional effectiveness (Hood, 1995). Within the higher education context, BLU transformation serves as a key mechanism to strengthen managerial autonomy and organizational adaptability (Altbach & Salmi, 2020). Successful transformation, however, requires readiness not only in financial systems but also in organizational structure, institutional culture, and human resource capability. As Lee and Wan (2020) observes in a comparative study of Southeast Asian universities, the success of semi-autonomous university models depends heavily on institutional capacity and strategic adaptation. Accordingly, this study argues that institutional readiness is a critical determinant of BLU transformation success. Without a clear strategic framework for capacity strengthening, universities risk remaining administratively compliant yet operationally stagnant.

Several studies have investigated the transformation of PTN-BLU. Siregar et al. (2024) conducted research on risk management design of state universities with legal entity status (PTN-BH), whereas Yudianti & Suryandari (2015) also emphasized the function of internal control in good university governance. Rizkia (2023) also underlined that the success of BLU hinged on financial accountability and organisational integration. However, previous studies have mostly examined the analysis of macro-level policy and finance management at the expense of institutional readiness and operational strategies for strengthening that become particularly important in institutions like PTN X. However, vocational schools are managed with specific dimensions of collaboration with the industry, running administrative efficiency and applied level insights dimensions that have typically been ignored in previous research (Prasetyo & Handayani, 2023). This theoretical and empirical oversight is the research gap that this study aims to fill.

Building on the findings discussed earlier, two main contributions emerge from this study. First, it fills an empirical gap by examining how Vocational Higher Education (VHE) institutions build institutional capacity during their transformation into Public Service

Agencies (BLUs) a level rarely explored in existing public sector reform literature. Second, it advances methodological understanding by employing a qualitative descriptive approach that captures the contextual and systemic nature of organizational readiness.

Previous BLU readiness assessments have predominantly relied on quantitative multi-criteria decision models, such as TOPSIS (Technique for Order Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution) and AHP (Analytic Hierarchy Process), which quantify readiness indicators but fail to uncover the managerial, cultural, and adaptive dimensions of institutional change. This study complements those models by revealing the lived processes and organizational dynamics underlying readiness. Theoretically, it extends Kotter's (2012) and Grindle's (1997) frameworks by demonstrating that leadership and institutional capacity must evolve simultaneously in vocational settings. Practically, the findings offer diagnostic insights for policymakers and institutional leaders seeking to design more coherent and adaptive BLU transformation strategies.

This study adopts Institutional Capacity Theory (Grindle, 1997) as its primary analytical lens. The theory posits that successful public sector reform depends on the interplay among three interrelated dimensions: institutional structure, resource capacity, and adaptive systems. It was selected because it accommodates not only the technical and structural elements of reform, but also the adaptive and cultural processes that determine the sustainability of change elements highly relevant to BLU transformation in vocational higher education. Kotter's (2012) Change Management Theory is used as a complementary framework, particularly to explain the leadership and behavioral dynamics that influence the adaptive system dimension of institutional capacity. Integrating these perspectives enables a more holistic understanding of how readiness develops at both structural and human levels. The applicability of this integrated capacity perspective is further reinforced by regional experiences in Malaysia and Thailand, where semi-autonomous university reforms have similarly improved resource governance and institutional adaptability demonstrating that capacity-building and autonomy are mutually reinforcing in higher education reform (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018; Lee & Wan, 2020).

In light of the above, this study aims to analyze the institutional readiness and strategic capacity-building efforts of PTN X as it transitions toward the Public Service Agency (BLU) governance model. It focuses on identifying key enablers and barriers that influence the implementation of BLU principles within vocational higher education institutions, and how these dynamics shape financial autonomy, accountability, and competitiveness. The study is framed within Indonesia's ongoing higher education reform agenda that emphasizes autonomy, transparency, and performance-based governance.

METHOD

This is a descriptive qualitative study with an objective that will portray the whole picture of institutional readiness and the strategies developed by PTN X as it transforms to become a BLU. This qualitative study provides opportunities for the examination of complex organizational phenomena in a context-bound and holistic manner attention being given to the experiences, views, and strategic practices of actors engaged in transformation (Creswell, 2014).

Research Approach and Design

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design with a single-case study approach, focusing on PTN X as a bounded system undergoing transformation into a Public Service Agency (Badan Layanan Umum or BLU). The single-case design was selected

because PTN X represents a critical and contemporary case of institutional transformation within Indonesia's vocational higher education sector.

PTN X is one of several state vocational universities in Indonesia that began the transition toward Public Service Agency (BLU) status in 2022, following national directives on higher education financial autonomy. The case is particularly relevant because internal audits and institutional reports revealed persistent administrative and governance challenges in adapting BLU-based financial systems while maintaining public accountability. These conditions make PTN X an illustrative example for understanding how institutional readiness and strategic responses unfold during organizational transformation.

Consistent with Yin's (2018) definition of a case study, the selection of PTN X allows for an in-depth, context-bound exploration of how a public vocational institution interprets and implements autonomy reform under complex organizational and regulatory constraints.

The research procedure followed five major stages:

1. Case selection and definition: PTN X was purposefully selected as a representative case of a state-owned vocational higher education institution mandated by the Ministry of Education to transition into BLU status.
2. Development of a research protocol: The researcher developed a case study protocol that included data collection instruments (interview and FGD guides), consent forms, and a document analysis checklist.
3. Data collection: Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document review.
4. Data analysis and triangulation: Data from different sources were analyzed thematically and triangulated to ensure validity and consistency.
5. Reporting and validation: Preliminary findings were shared with participants for feedback (member checking) and with academic peers for debriefing.

This approach enabled a holistic understanding of PTN X's institutional transformation by integrating the perspectives, experiences, and strategies of key actors involved in the process.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at PTN X, a state-owned vocational higher education institution located in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only individuals directly involved in the BLU transformation process were included.

A total of 14 participants took part in the study, consisting of:

- 2 top leaders
- 4 heads of administrative and financial bureaus
- 3 heads of academic or quality assurance units
- 5 senior lecturers actively involved in institutional policy implementation

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Holding a formal role related to institutional governance, finance, or planning;
2. Actively involved in the BLU preparation committee or equivalent task force; and
3. Having served at PTN X for a minimum of three years.

Each participant was contacted formally through institutional permission, provided with an information sheet about the study, and gave written informed consent prior to participation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three complementary techniques semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and document analysis following qualitative research principles outlined by Sugiyono (2024).

1. Semi-structured interviews:
 - a) Conducted individually with 10 key informants.
 - b) Each session lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded with participant consent.
 - c) Interview questions covered perceptions of institutional readiness, constraints, enabling factors, and strategic actions in the BLU transformation.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):
 - a) Two FGDs were conducted, each involving 5–6 participants from diverse units.
 - b) Discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes, moderated by the researcher, with one assistant serving as a note-taker.
 - c) The sessions followed the structured stages of Krueger and Casey (2015): opening, introductory, transition, key, and closing questions.
 - d) FGDs aimed to confirm interview findings and stimulate collaborative reflection among participants regarding ongoing transformation efforts.
3. Document analysis:
 - a) Institutional documents such as strategic planning reports (*Renstra*), financial statements, performance audits, and ministerial circulars on BLU transformation were reviewed.
 - b) The document data provided contextual background and were used to cross-verify statements from interviews and FGDs.

All data collection took place over a three-month period, allowing for iterative reflection between data sources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure, applied in an iterative and reflexive manner:

1. Familiarization: All interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data.
2. Generating initial codes: The researcher conducted manual open coding, combining inductive and deductive approaches.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting patterns of institutional readiness, challenges, and strategic actions.
4. Reviewing themes: The initial themes were refined by re-examining the coded extracts and the entire data set.
5. Defining and naming themes: Clear and coherent definitions were developed for each theme.
6. Producing the report: Final themes were presented with supporting quotations from participants to illustrate key findings.

To enhance reliability and confirmability, the coding and theme validation processes were reviewed by two academic peers familiar with qualitative methods and higher education governance. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness of the Research

The study adopted strategies from Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework to ensure the trustworthiness of findings:

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation of data sources and member checking with participants.
- **Dependability:** Supported by maintaining detailed field notes and documentation of analytical decisions.
- **Confirmability:** Ensured through peer debriefing and reflexive journaling by the researcher.

- Transferability: Enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the institutional context and participant roles.

Research Ethics

This study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation from all respondents. Data collection was conducted transparently, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights to withdraw at any time. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional committee at PTN X before the commencement of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Overview of Institutional Readiness

The overall findings show that PTN X demonstrates a moderate level of readiness in its transformation toward Public Service Agency (*Badan Layanan Umum* or BLU) status. Over the past five years, the institution has implemented internal reforms in financial governance, the development of revenue-generating units, and the alignment of its strategic plan with BLU managerial needs. These are positive steps indicating an openness to institutional autonomy and flexibility.

However, readiness remains unevenly distributed across units. Some departments are advanced in interpreting and applying BLU principles, while others are still at the early stage of adjustment. As one participant expressed during FGD-1:

“We already understand the importance of BLU transformation, but not everyone moves at the same pace or with the same clarity about what to do.” (FGD-1/P2)

Another participant responded, emphasizing the role of leadership commitment:

“When the rectorate communicates the vision, it motivates us, but many still think BLU is only about finance, not governance.” (FGD-1/P3)

These exchanges reflect an ongoing process of organizational sense-making. Cultural readiness remains partial indicating that PTN X’s transformation, so far, emphasizes *structural adjustment* rather than *cultural internalization*. This supports Altbach and Salmi’s (2020) view that institutional change in developing contexts often focuses on procedural conformity rather than deeper cultural transformation.

Governance and Organizational Reform

Governance reform is among PTN X’s strongest yet most complex areas. The institution has established internal audit, quality assurance, and monitoring systems, which have improved transparency and accountability. Decision-making has become more systematic through performance evaluations and committee-based processes.

Nevertheless, bureaucratic overlaps persist. FGD discussions revealed that formal structures often coexist with informal networks that determine coordination effectiveness:

“We already have a clear structure, but coordination still depends on personal relationships.” (FGD-1/P4)

“Sometimes tasks overlap because no single unit feels fully responsible.” (FGD-2/P1)

Participants largely agreed that structural clarity has not yet translated into institutionalized collaboration. Within Kotter's (2012) *Change Management Theory*, these findings highlight that leadership and a shared vision are necessary but insufficient. In a public vocational university, governance transformation must include system redesign, reducing bureaucracy, and promoting participatory management.

Thus, this case extends Kotter's model by emphasizing that sustainable reform in public education requires both *transformational leadership* and *organizational system coherence* a balance between human and structural capacity.

Financial Independence and Resource Management

Financial readiness remains the backbone of BLU transformation. PTN X has taken steps toward revenue diversification through professional training, consultancy services, and industry partnerships. Yet, according to reviewed financial reports, non-tax revenue still constitutes less than 20% of the total institutional budget.

During FGD-2, participants openly discussed this dilemma:

"We're trying to be financially independent, but balancing regulation and innovation is hard." (FGD-2/P3)

"The incentive scheme for income-generating units is unclear, so people hesitate to take risks." (FGD-2/P4)

This reflects a core tension between financial autonomy and bureaucratic accountability. Using Grindle's (1997) *Institutional Capacity Theory*, PTN X demonstrates improving procedural capacity but limited adaptive capacity particularly in entrepreneurial mindset and incentive structures.

Compared with Malaysia's semi-autonomous universities, which successfully developed endowment and industry-based funding schemes (Lee & Wan, 2020), PTN X's progress is still modest. Nonetheless, its initiatives toward transparent budgeting and modernization represent genuine commitment to reform. The challenge now lies in developing internal confidence to make performance-based financial decisions, moving beyond compliance toward innovation.

Digitalization and Human Resource Readiness

Digital transformation at PTN X is visible yet fragmented. Multiple systems academic, financial, and personnel operate in silos. This leads to duplicated data and reduced efficiency. During FGD-1, an IT staff member explained:

"Each unit has its own platform; integration is still a work in progress." (FGD-1/P1)

A lively exchange followed when another participant added:

"Technology isn't the real issue it's people's habits. Some are still uncomfortable with the new system." (FGD-1/P2)

This interaction highlights that the digital challenge is socio-technical, not purely infrastructural. Rizkia (2023) argues that digital transformation requires an enabling culture as much as technology. At PTN X, capacity-building activities exist but remain ad hoc rather than continuous professional development.

Thus, beyond system integration, the institution must cultivate a digital mindset through ongoing mentoring, incentives for adoption, and recognition of digital leadership at all levels. A successful BLU transformation depends on human adaptability, not merely technological availability.

External Engagement and International Collaboration

PTN X shows notable progress in domestic collaboration, particularly with industries and local governments. However, international partnerships remain symbolic often limited to Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) without follow-up implementation.

As discussed in FGD-2:

“We’ve signed several MoUs with foreign universities, but the activities rarely continue afterward.” (FGD-2/P5)

This sentiment was echoed by others who cited administrative rigidity and limited funding as barriers. Compared with Thailand’s Rajamangala Universities of Technology where industrial collaboration is tied to international engagement (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018; Scott & Guan, 2023) PTN X remains primarily domestically oriented.

Strengthening global partnerships would not only improve reputation and research exposure but also open opportunities for funding, staff exchanges, and international benchmarking all crucial for enhancing BLU competitiveness.

Interconnections Between Governance, Finance, and Digitalization

One of the study’s key insights is that readiness dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Governance reform depends on financial transparency; financial independence requires digital accountability; and both rely on capable human resources.

Limited digital integration, for instance, constrains financial monitoring and decision-making. Similarly, fragmented coordination between units hampers innovation and resource utilization. This confirms Grindle’s (1997) notion that institutional reform is systemic and non-linear improvement must occur simultaneously across capacities.

Consequently, PTN X’s readiness should be understood not as a checklist of indicators but as a living system requiring coherence and balance. Even incremental improvements in coordination or data integration can have ripple effects on overall institutional performance.

Table 1. Summary of Institutional Readiness Dimensions and Strategic Implications

Dimension	Key Strengths	Main Challenges	Strategic Implications
Governance	Clear structure, internal audit & QA units	Informal coordination; overlapping roles	Formalize cross-unit SOPs and accountability matrix
Finance	Transparent budgeting; diversified income attempts	Limited PNBP (<20%); weak incentives	Develop performance-based incentive schemes
Digitalization	Multiple operational systems	Fragmented platforms; uneven digital literacy	Integrate data systems; create tiered digital training
Human Resources	Committed leadership	Cultural resistance to innovation	Foster adaptive learning and mentoring culture
External Engagement	Strong local partnerships	Weak international follow-up	Institutionalize KPI-based global collaborations

Strategic Implications and Theoretical Reflections

From a strategic standpoint, PTN X experience provides several lessons for other vocational higher education institutions undergoing similar transitions. First, transformation must go beyond administrative adjustment; it needs to nurture a shared understanding of autonomy across all organizational levels. Second, financial sustainability must be developed gradually through a combination of internal innovation and external partnerships. Third, digitalization and HR capacity development must move together, ensuring that systems and people evolve in sync.

Theoretically, the findings extend the discussion of New Public Management (Hood, 1995) and Institutional Capacity Theory (Grindle, 1997) by highlighting that autonomy in vocational education is not binary it is gradual, negotiated, and context-dependent. Unlike research universities, vocational institutions such as PTN X must balance educational mandates, industrial relevance, and financial autonomy simultaneously. This multidimensional challenge shows that autonomy is not only managerial but also adaptive.

In short, transformation toward BLU status should not be seen as a one-time institutional milestone, but as a continuous learning process. PTN X journey reflects how public vocational institutions in Indonesia are trying to bridge the gap between policy aspiration and operational reality a process that requires persistence, leadership, and organizational learning over time.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the transformation of PTN X toward BLU status is still in progress and can be categorized as moderately ready. The institution has made noticeable improvements in areas such as governance, financial management, and internal control. However, some aspects still need more consistent effort, especially in coordination between units, the development of financial independence, and the full use of digital systems. Overall, the transformation has begun to take shape, but the cultural change that supports autonomy is still growing. The journey of PTN X reflects how a vocational higher education institution learns to balance regulation with innovation while building a stronger foundation for institutional flexibility and accountability.

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. The research mainly focuses on the internal situation of PTN X, so it does not capture much input from external stakeholders such as industry partners or policy regulators who also influence the success of BLU implementation. In addition, the study used a qualitative descriptive approach, which provides depth but limits the ability to generalize the results to other institutions. The research was also conducted during an early stage of the transformation process, so some findings describe perceptions and expectations rather than final outcomes. Future studies could compare several vocational institutions that have reached different levels of BLU maturity to provide a broader and more dynamic understanding.

Based on these findings, several steps can be suggested. First, PTN X needs to strengthen coordination between its organizational units, especially by integrating management information systems and ensuring that every division has the same understanding of BLU goals. Second, financial independence should be encouraged gradually, for example through partnerships with industries, applied research collaborations, and alumni-based funding initiatives. Third, capacity building for human resources should become a continuous agenda, not only through technical training but also by nurturing leadership, teamwork, and an innovation-oriented culture. Lastly, international collaboration needs to be expanded in a more active and measurable way so that PTN X can learn from best practices in other countries and strengthen its position as a competitive vocational institution.

With these improvements, PTN X can move steadily toward becoming a BLU institution that is not only compliant with regulations but also adaptive, creative, and impactful for society.

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