

Designing a Competency Model for Administrative Managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to identify the key components of competency for administrative managers at various levels within the Ministry of Education to propose a model.

Methodology: To develop the research framework, the dimensions of the competency concept in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province were first extracted through document reviews, archival studies, and library research using card-based note-taking methods. Subsequently, the Delphi method was implemented in three stages, utilizing the insights of 29 experts familiar with the research topic to identify the most critical dimensions of competency within the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province. A snowball sampling method was employed during this phase. In the next stage, after determining the sample size based on the Morgan table and applying simple random sampling, 218 administrative managers and staff (including experts and higher levels) from the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province (encompassing one general department and five districts) were selected. Identified dimensions and factors were distributed to participants in the form of a questionnaire. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings: Finally, a competency model for administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province was designed, comprising 27 critical competencies categorized into four domains: operational competencies, social competencies, cognitive competencies, and meta-competencies. The only difference lies in the varying degrees of importance of these competencies for senior, mid-level, and junior administrative managers.

Conclusion: The final proposed model can be utilized within the competency-based human resource management system of the Ministry of Education for training, recruitment, and performance evaluation of administrative managers at different levels.

Keywords: Competency, competency model, senior managers, mid-level managers, junior managers

1 Introduction

Competency is one of the central concepts for many leading companies in today's dynamic world. In fact, human resource competency or expertise is one of the critical keys to success in organizational competition. Emphasizing this concept and striving to maintain and enhance human resource competencies can guide organizations through the complexities of their lifecycle, which is now more dynamic than ever before (Saeed Panah et al., 2019, 2020). In other words, organizations today require managers who can make sound decisions, propose creative solutions to problems, and be accountable for their responsibilities (Kandarani et al., 2025; Mikla, 2025). Managers are the decision-makers concerning organizational events and conditions and allocate resources accordingly. Therefore, they must possess managerial skills and techniques to lead, direct, and control organizational activities, thereby achieving the organization's objectives. Consequently, identifying, selecting, and employing competent and effective managers is one of the main challenges and concerns of organizations, particularly knowledge-based organizations, academic institutions, and universities (Yargholi et al., 2024; Zaharov & Kashtanova, 2024).

Since the concept of competency was introduced, institutions, companies, and organizations have developed competency models tailored to their specific conditions and objectives. Each model examines managerial competencies from a distinct perspective. Today, organizations face an overwhelming volume of general and specialized competencies when selecting and appointing managers for various work domains. The absence of a model that optimally combines these competencies for managerial selection and appointment is evident (Saeed Panah et al., 2019, 2020). Competencies are crucial for various human resource functions, encompassing a wide range of activities, from recruitment and performance management to strategic organizational planning, structural design, and organizational culture development. Well-defined competencies can be taught, learned, measured, and improved. Competencies play a role in aligning individuals with specific roles, enhancing human resource activities, boosting individual contributions to organizational success, and creating added value for customers (Staškeviča, 2019).

Thus, managerial competencies, especially in public sector human resources that oversee competency-based management systems, hold significant importance (Mousavi

et al., 2020). Attention to competencies and their development has become one of the primary concerns of organizational managers. Many public and private organizations either have competency frameworks or seek to establish such structures (Grillenberger & Romeike, 2018). Today, healthcare systems worldwide face increasing complexity and multifaceted challenges, such as higher workloads, staffing shortages, and rising care costs. Healthcare managers, professionals, and nurses often find themselves at the center of these issues. Consequently, healthcare managers continuously seek the "best" approaches to improve employee and patient outcomes amid these challenges. Addressing these and other healthcare-related challenges requires practical leadership from health managers (Staškeviča, 2019).

On the other hand, management is one of the most significant human efforts in the history of social life. Human societies consist of organizations with various objectives, each tasked with specific functions. Societies achieve their desired goals when all organizations fulfill their functions and programs to meet their objectives (Tayebi et al., 2010). In all organizations, management is the most critical factor influencing the attainment of goals. A manager, as the organization's official representative, coordinates activities and enhances effectiveness. Organizational success in achieving objectives depends on how management is conducted (Nwokah & Augustine, 2018). For organizational success, the most competent individuals must be employed in the most suitable positions (Shum et al., 2018).

Competency encompasses a set of behaviors, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and personality traits closely related to successful performance (Sinnot et al., 2022). Competency management originated in the private sector and was transferred to the public sector during the 1990s. It represents a new trend in the public sector that requires further research (Bahrad et al., 2024).

An examination of existing resources in the Ministry of Education, including the Research Organization, the Center for International Affairs, and external deployment documents, reveals that the concept of competency as outlined in these resources is general and lacks precise definitions of professional and specialized competencies for managers. The primary focus of these documents is on selecting line managers with an emphasis on general competencies. Precise components to determine the competency and eligibility of administrative managers are absent.

Moreover, given the significant role of education in society and its distinct and value-oriented functions, existing studies, while useful as guides for identifying components for selecting senior managers, are neither comprehensive nor sufficient. Studies have not specifically addressed the design of competency models for administrative managers at various managerial levels. Instead, they have merely identified and assessed general competency components for administrative managers, indicating a lack of specialized focus in the field under study. Each managerial level involves different roles, and it is evident that the required competencies for identifying managerial components vary across levels.

Thus, selecting and appointing administrative managers necessitates a cohesive competency model aligned with the sub-systems of management and leadership in the education sector. This model must provide comprehensive components of required competencies for administrative managers to assist stakeholders. However, the management and leadership sub-system lacks detailed competency components that could serve as templates for selecting and appointing managers.

Therefore, defining the required competencies for educational system managers, particularly heads and directors of administrative departments, is closely tied to the outcomes of the education sector. These managers are responsible for policymaking, strategic planning, high-level supervision of the education system (senior managers), coordination, and communication between high-level units within administrative departments (middle managers), and the implementation of organizational policies and plans (junior managers).

The research problem of this study is to investigate and identify the competency criteria for administrative managers at senior, middle, and junior levels within the education system. The aim is to propose a comprehensive model of dimensions, components, and indicators of competency for administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province.

2 Methods and Materials

The results of this research were obtained through a mixed-method approach, conducted in two separate qualitative and quantitative phases. In the qualitative phase, the study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, as the observed realities are subject to the researcher's interpretation and perspective. According to this principle,

reality is not uniform for everyone, and individuals may have different experiences of the same reality.

From the perspective of research objectives, as the study focuses on designing a competency model for administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province, it falls within the realm of applied research. Given its focus on research questions, the study follows the pragmatism philosophy. The approach used is inductive, and the strategy employed is a survey.

In the qualitative phase, a snowball sampling method was used to select participants. Data were collected using the Delphi technique, document reviews, library studies, and archival analysis. In the quantitative phase, participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method, based on a formula for sampling from a finite population. Within each stratum, random sampling was conducted to ensure that each unit (expert-level staff and above) within a specific category (one general department and five districts in the province's center) was represented. Proportional random samples were drawn for each category, and data collection was conducted using a researcher-designed questionnaire.

Sanders et al. recommend the use of qualitative research methods to obtain firsthand information. Thus, qualitative methods were employed in this study to identify the components of the competency model for administrative managers, considering their duties, missions, objectives, and contextual factors affecting the performance of Iran's public organizations, particularly the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province. To validate the findings, a partial least squares (PLS) approach was used, making this research a sequential exploratory mixed-method study.

The rationale for selecting a mixed-method approach includes:

1. Obtaining more comprehensive evidence for designing a competency model for administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province.
2. The absence of an existing competency model for administrative managers in this context.
3. The necessity of incorporating expert perspectives.

The study was conducted in three phases:

1. **Content Analysis:** Relevant literature, including books, articles, and printed and electronic library resources, was analyzed to identify the dimensions and components of administrative managerial competencies at various levels. Data collection involved the use of note-taking cards for recording the dimensions and components.

2. **Delphi Technique:** After defining the research problem and objectives, a Delphi panel of 29 experts (human resource management scholars and experts from the Ministry of Education's assessment centers) was formed. Invitation forms were sent to participants. Initially, the panel was asked to identify key dimensions and components of competencies for three managerial levels (senior, middle, and junior) within the Education Department. A questionnaire was developed based on the literature, prior research, and regulatory documents and distributed in the first Delphi round. Panelists were asked to assess the importance of the components and suggest revisions. Subsequent rounds refined the questionnaire by adding new criteria and identifying consensus among panel members. After three Delphi rounds, consensus was reached, and the final model and research questionnaire were developed.
3. **Model Testing and Validation:** The final phase involved the administration of a 96-item questionnaire to validate the model derived from the qualitative phase. A total of 218 questionnaires were distributed among administrative managers and staff (expert-level and above) within the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province (one general department and five districts).

To determine the degree of consensus within the Delphi panel, Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) was used. This measure, ranging from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (complete

agreement), is particularly useful for assessing inter-rater validity (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2005). After reaching consensus on the criteria and influential indicators, the initial model was tested using the PLS method. Construct validity was assessed through face, content, convergent, and discriminant validity, while reliability was measured using principal component analysis, Cronbach's alpha, and Dillon-Goldstein's rho.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 3 software, employing descriptive and inferential statistics. Structural equation modeling (SEM) with PLS, focusing on variance between constructs, was used to test the research questions.

In the final phase, to validate the derived model, a 96-item questionnaire was administered to the research sample. The data from 218 completed questionnaires, collected from administrative managers and staff (expert-level and above) of the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province, were analyzed. The findings were used for inferential analysis and to validate the proposed competency model.

3 Findings and Results

In response to the main research question, it can be concluded that, based on the calculations performed, the confirmatory factor analysis model—after necessary revisions—has been finalized in two states: the standardized estimation state and the significance state, as illustrated in figures below.

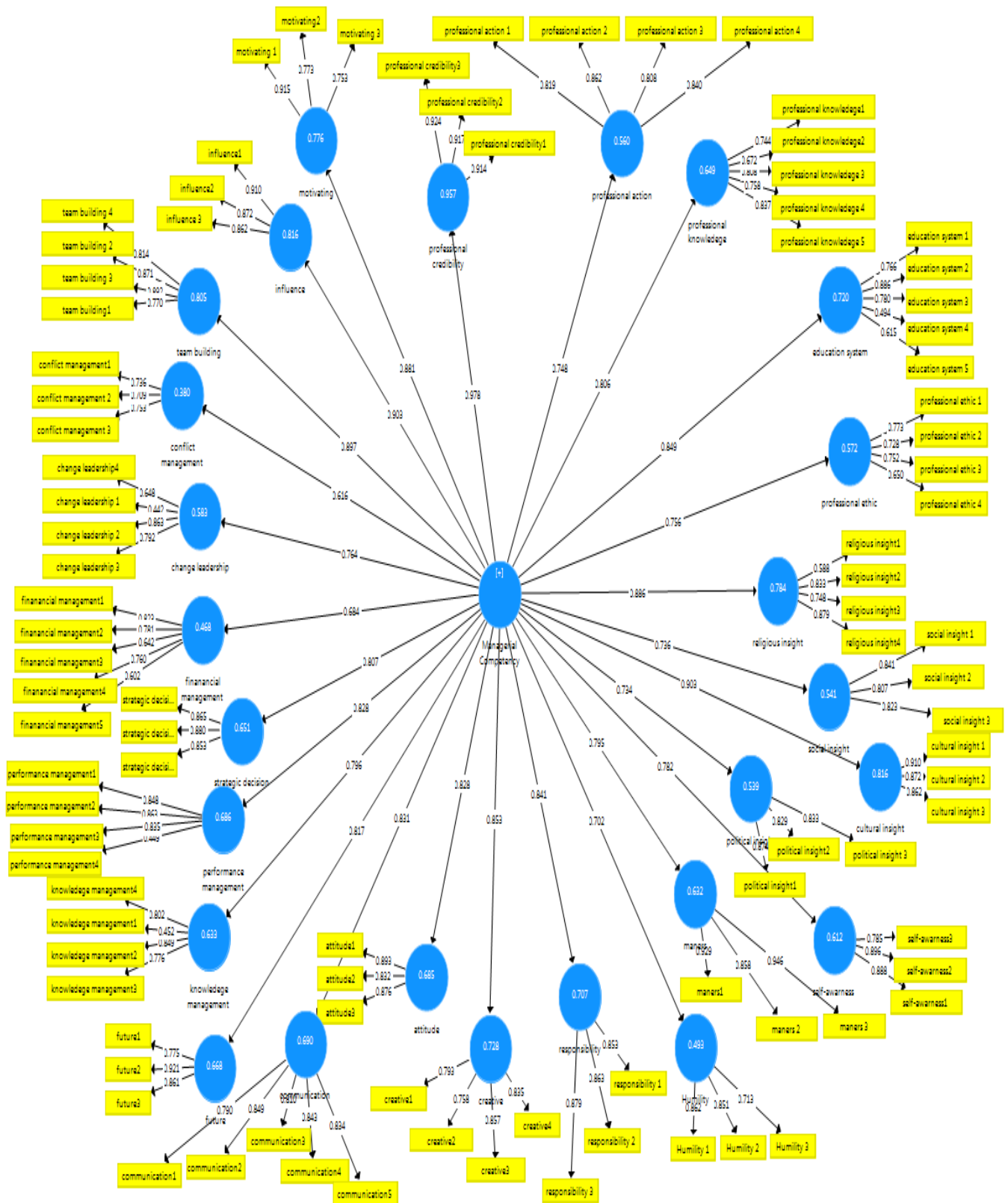
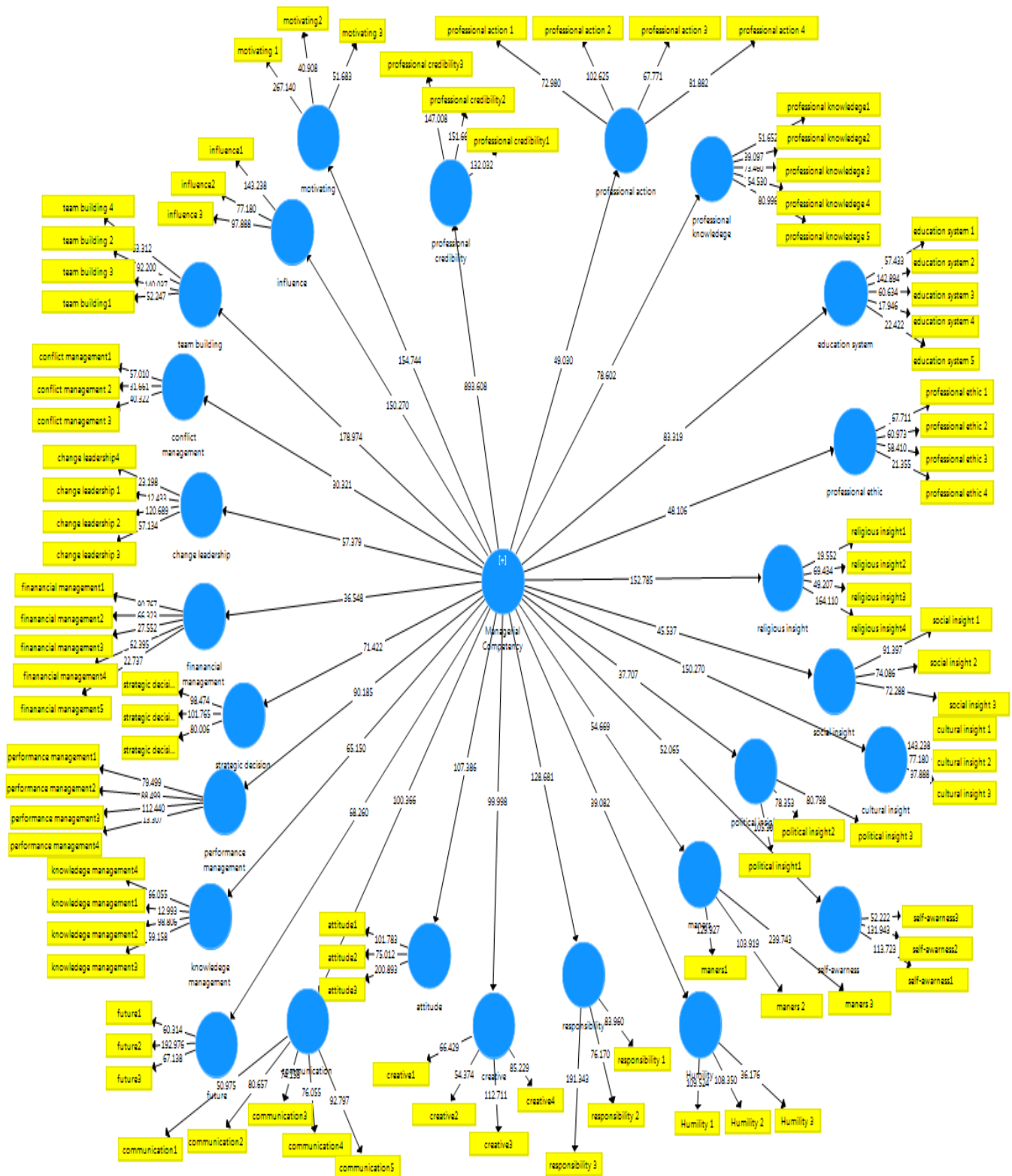
Figure 1*Structural Model of the Research in the Standardized Estimation State*

Figure 2*Structural Model of the Research in the Significance State*

The proposed competency model for administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan

Province was evaluated for goodness-of-fit using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Key model fit indexes were

calculated based on data collected from a sample of 218 administrative managers and staff, representing one general department and five districts. The Chi-Square/df ratio was found to be 2.89, which falls within the acceptable range of below 3, indicating a good fit between the proposed model and the observed data. Additionally, the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) was reported as 0.91, exceeding the threshold of 0.90, further supporting the adequacy of the model in representing the data structure.

The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), a measure of model error, was calculated to be 0.058, which is below the recommended upper limit of 0.08, suggesting an acceptable error level in the model's fit to the data. Furthermore, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) were reported as 0.94 and 0.92, respectively. Both values surpass the standard threshold of 0.90, demonstrating the comparative superiority of the proposed model over a null model. These values collectively indicate that the model provides a robust explanation of the relationships among the competencies identified in the research.

Finally, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was found to be 0.045, which is well below the acceptable limit of 0.08, confirming the overall adequacy of the model's fit. The results of these fit indexes suggest that the proposed competency model aligns well with the empirical data obtained from the sample, supporting its validity and applicability for practical use in managerial competency assessment and development within the Education Department. This robust model fit ensures that the findings are reliable and can serve as a foundation for competency-based human resource practices.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The establishment of a meritocratic system in any country contributes to its stability, acceptance, and legitimacy. Thus, the selection of competent managers to lead organizations is of particular importance. The implementation of a competency-based system, as one of the nation's strategic policies, has been emphasized in the Twenty-Year Vision Document and the Fourth Development Plan. In today's complex and ever-changing society, developing managerial capabilities at various levels is one of the most critical objectives for organizations to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their activities. However, the first step toward achieving a meritocracy is identifying the competencies required. This is why numerous studies, both

domestically and internationally, have focused on designing competency models for managers. Employing a competency-based approach in management is one of the most effective strategies to achieve organizational productivity. Therefore, this study aimed to design a competency model for senior, middle, and junior administrative managers in the Education Department of East Azerbaijan Province.

The success of organizations largely depends on the competencies, abilities, and qualifications of their managers. No organization has achieved sustainable success without wise, efficient, and capable management. In meritocratic societies, traditional attitudes such as nepotism, tribalism, and partisan favoritism have been discarded, recognizing that these outdated practices lead to stagnation and failure in a competitive environment. Failure to select competent managers results in organizational setbacks and the inability to achieve objectives and missions. Experience shows that while many managers are eager to create competency frameworks for their organizations, they often lack knowledge about the parameters needed for such models.

In today's competitive and turbulent business environment, managers face numerous challenges (Nwokah & Augustine, 2018). They must guide their organizations to withstand global competition, rapidly changing customer expectations, increasing alliances, partnerships, mergers, acquisitions, technological advancements, and evolving employee expectations regarding working conditions. Understanding and addressing these challenges, while creating value for customers, employees, investors, and organizations, necessitates reliance on human capital as the primary resource. Therefore, organizational success and excellence should be examined through the lens of human resource management, which must cultivate and develop competencies (Podmetina et al., 2018).

The focus on competencies in management has also gained traction in public and governmental sectors, where competency frameworks have been used to transform bureaucratic organizations into efficient and flexible units. Countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Japan have recognized the role of competency frameworks in improving governance capacity and the efficiency of public services. Competency-based systems enable governments to provide better services to citizens while adapting to rapid changes and improving employee competencies (Bahrad et al., 2024; Beheshti Zavareh et al., 2018).

A comparative analysis shows that the findings of this study align with previous research, such as Behrad et al. (2024) on designing a competency model for senior tax experts (Bahrad et al., 2024); Seyyed Javadin et al. (2022) on identifying the competencies of exemplary managers through Quranic studies (Seyed Javadin et al., 2021); Khanifar et al. (2020) on the competency framework for education managers (Khanifar et al., 2020); Haraqi & Darvishi (2020) on selecting professional managers in governmental organizations (Haraqi & Darvishi, 2019); Ashiqi et al. (2017) on competency development in the banking industry (Ashiqi et al., 2017); Hashemnia et al. (2015) on enhancing managerial competencies in schools (Hashemnia et al., 2015); Dorji et al. (2019) on identifying and improving managerial competencies (Dorji et al., 2019); Dzeninoski (2017) on project manager competencies in Poland's construction industry (Dziekoński, 2017); Skorkova (2016) on public sector competency models (Skorková, 2016); Kang (2015) on designing a middle manager competency model in Korea (Kang et al., 2015); and Nawaz et al. (2013) on professional development in Pakistan's banking sector (Nawaz, 2013).

Many prior studies have presented competency dimensions and components in a scattered and unbalanced manner, often targeting specific organizational sections or levels without tiered classifications. However, the present research offers a three-tiered model tailored to senior, middle, and junior managerial levels. Each identified competency is designed for a specific managerial level, facilitating the development and training of personnel for career progression. The comprehensive nature of this model ensures that it encompasses all dimensions and components of competency, making it suitable for multi-tiered organizational structures.

A key feature of this model is the ranking of competencies based on their relative importance. While certain competencies appear at higher ranks, others with greater overall significance might rank lower due to averaging across multiple dimensions. This study identified 26 managerial competencies, including financial and budget management, performance management, knowledge management, self-awareness, strategic decision-making, future-oriented planning, motivational leadership, accountability, influence, team building, change leadership, conflict management, interpersonal skills, communication skills, political insight, religious and cultural awareness, social insight, professional ethics, understanding the

education system, professional knowledge, professional actions, professional credibility, humility, and modesty.

The proposed competency model fosters consensus among managers regarding the most valuable organizational competencies. This consensus encourages a focused approach to competency development and enhancement. Senior education administrators are advised to utilize this model to identify gaps between current and desired competency levels and plan developmental initiatives. The model also provides clear guidance for promoting operational managers to higher levels, outlining the behaviors and skills required for their advancement.

By categorizing competencies across managerial levels, organizations can streamline processes such as promotions, training, and talent management. Furthermore, having interconnected competency models for multiple organizational levels creates added value, facilitating human resource development and organizational excellence. The Education Department can leverage this model to enhance its human capital, ultimately improving organizational performance and achieving strategic objectives.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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