

Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Solutions in Higher Education Management: A Comprehensive Analysis of Global Trends and Institutional Dynamics

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Abstract. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are experiencing a paradigm shift resulting from marketization, digitalization, financial constraints, and the need for accountability. The present paper reviews the existing theories and practices of modern higher education management. The paper discusses the classical governance models of bureaucracy, collegial, and politics as well as new paradigms of New Public Management (NPM) and Enterprise. The paper highlights the tensions between academic and control paradigms. Tensions between autonomy and management, collegial and enterprise, and tradition and innovation are the biggest paradoxes facing modern higher education. The major challenges of university management are: financial sustainability, administrative overload, quality assurance, bureaucratic red tape, and digitalization. Decentralized information systems, low capacity for technological adoption, and market competition for scarce resources are major challenges to university management. Differences between public and private institutions are also explored, particularly regarding political interference, profit orientation, and employment conditions. The paper suggests both strategic and operational solutions based on strategic management, Resource-Based View (RBV), Lean principles, diversification of revenue streams, and digitalization. Transformational and shared leadership are necessary for dealing with change and paradox. Leaderships development and digital governance are the instruments for building resilient institutions. The paper concludes that there is a need for modern HEIs to reconcile all the challenges and paradoxes through a strategic integration of planning, finance, operations, and academic values. Instead of a choice between managerialism and collegium, it is necessary to develop a hybrid model of governance capable of managing paradoxes and tensions for academic survival.

Keywords: *Higher Education Management; University Governance; New Public Management; Strategic Management; Financial Sustainability; Digital Transformation; Quality Assurance; Shared Leadership; Resource-Based View; Institutional Paradoxes.*

1. Introduction

The management of higher education institutions has long been special as situated in the midst of public administration, science, and organizational complexity. But the contemporary academic world is not merely the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Rather, academia is situated in a turbulent ecology of hyper-competition, rising cost, and digital disruption (Maguad, 2018).

Consequently, there has been a shift from the classical Humboldtian form, where research and teaching were united in a self-governing academic community, to more formalized, managerial, and entrepreneurial New Public Management (NPM) (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023). This opposition between the two forms is the primary context for the management problems and solutions discussed in the academic literature.

The university today is conceptualized as an enterprise that must reconcile the academic goal with the administrative needs and demands of external stakeholders such as government, industries, faculty members, and a more consumerist body of students (Maguad, 2018). This is not just an administrative issue but an organizational issue of identity and purpose. As universities become bigger and complex, the contradiction between the logic of collegiality, bureaucracy, and entrepreneurship is often observed (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023). This report discusses the theoretical frameworks used in the management of higher education, the diagnostic issues that have emerged due to issues of finance, technology, and regulation, and the remedial issues that are suggested by the researchers to sustain the university.

In addition, the nature of management of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) is changing due to the advent of organized anarchy characterized by unclear goals and a porous structure. Managing under this context calls for political, professional and administrative structures and the balance between control and academic freedom (Shah et al., 2018). Building on this foundation, the purpose of this paper is to integrate the major theoretical frameworks of higher education governance and to relate them to the dominant management issues most often mentioned in the literature. The value lies in the conversion of scattered theoretical knowledge into a diagnostic framework that enables managers and policy makers to better understand why governance concerns endure and which managerial responses are most often discussed to maintain institutional performance and legitimacy.

Methodologically, the paper employs a narrative literature review and conceptual synthesis approach. Studies on the governance and management of HEIs were reviewed and classified in relation to (i) governance models and logic, (ii) the problems, challenges and drivers and (iii) the strategic, managerial and leadership solutions. The paper thus contributes to the literature in two ways: (i) it discusses governance theory and management practice within the same conceptual framework and (ii) it presents how different logics lead to enduring paradoxes (autonomy and accountability, collegiality and managerialism) and how the current set of solutions address these paradoxes. The paper's originality thus lies in the "theory-to-action" framework, which combines governance models, problems and solutions, rather than presenting them as distinct research themes.

To guide the reader through this argument, the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, the main theoretical frameworks for the governance of higher education institutions are reviewed. In Section 3, the main management issues that HEIs are currently facing are identified. In Section 4, the strategic management and operative responses documented in the literature are discussed. In Section 5, the development of leadership and the organizational change are considered as necessary conditions for the implementation of the previous measures. Finally, the main implications for research and practice are outlined in Section 6.

2. Theoretical Models of Higher Education Governance

Higher education management is a topic that may be approached from a theoretical viewpoint by tracing the policy-making and power-sharing images through which it has evolved. At various

times the bureaucratic, collegial, political and managerial images have been used to frame notions of effective organization and academic mission.

The bureaucratic model, which originated from Weberian theory, refers to a university that is legally-rational authoritative with a chain of command, predetermined goals, and labor differentiation to achieve an efficient outcome (Blau, 1973). In a bureaucratic institution, power is centralized, and decision-making is communicated from top down. This can result in fixed salary scales, merit-based promotion, and predictable career ladders, but is also often considered slow to respond, resistant to change, and plagued with the so-called academic bloat which results from too much red tape (Tran et al., 2025). Little room is left for innovation and the possibility exists that what is important for administrators may be irrelevant to faculty in their disciplines.

As a counterpoint to bureaucracy, the collegial model posits the university as a community of scholars that operate according to a regime of self-governance in which decision making is shared between faculty and administrators and in which professional status takes precedence over bureaucratic position (Shah et al., 2018). Collegiality, in this sense, is not merely a social choice but an instituted form of self-governance with codified decision-making procedures and normative identities premised on notions of academic integrity. The ascendance of the “enterprise” university, however, has posed a challenge to the established ascendancy of the collegial model. Reforms inspired by a market ethos aim to supplant faculty self-management with managerial prerogatives, diminishing faculty influence and causing feelings of disenfranchisement among academic staff who believe that “managerial rationality usurps intellectual values” (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023).

A third way to understand the situation is the political model. This model admits that there is conflict and competition for resources in the dynamic organization that is a university. Decisions are made in this model by power groups and political elites through negotiations. It is a model that also allows for the power that can be wielded by junior faculty, students, and others outside of the university, and their influence on the decision makers through organization and lobbying (Baldrige, 1971). Working in close relation with this model is the concept of the organized anarchy. Organized anarchy is the idea that the university is an organization with goals that are often problematic, technology that is unclear, and participation that is fluid. It is a model that admits that academic governance can be quite messy, that solutions can be looking for problems, and that decision making can occur in a garbage can rather than through rational choice (Cohen & March, 1974).

Overlaid on these older models in the last few decades are the NPM and the Enterprise model. The NPM is a push for rationalization in HE (Higher Education), importing private sector business management practices to increase the accountability, performance measurement and effectiveness of HEIs. An outgrowth of the NPM is the practice of “enterprise governance”, a corporate-style management of HEIs which compete for students, research monies, prestige and so on. The NPM addresses the inefficiency of the bureaucratic model but at the same time, worsens its conflict with the collegial model, as faculty push back against the commodification of education and the turning of academic labour into measured performance indicators (Maguad, 2018).

Some of the ways organizations have tried to address these issues is through shared governance and shared leadership. Shared governance is a more official separation of responsibilities between faculty and administration, where policy issues concerning academic affairs are relegated to faculty, and managerial and financial matters are relegated to administration. Shared leadership is

a rejection of the leader-follower dichotomy, and seeks to take advantage of the leadership capacity of faculty and staff. It involves teamwork, shared mental models, and the creation of an infrastructure to leverage the collective intelligence in the institution. The benefit of shared leadership is that it creates institutional memory and creates a sense of co-ownership for institutional goals, and allows the institution to endure the transitions of senior leaders (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

3. Primary Management Problems in Contemporary Institutions

The shift to managerialism and the 21st century pressures have also resulted in some key challenges that endanger the sustainability and excellence of higher education. These challenges can be classified into financial, operational and socio-technological challenges.

Financial sustainability is thus a key issue for all universities, as they currently face a “perfect storm” of rising operating costs, growing student numbers, and a downward trend in government support. The result is that many university systems are experiencing a “financial crunch,” as funding shortfalls risk making it difficult to meet the full economic costs of providing academic programs, which could undermine the academic quality and ultimately, long-term sustainability of the academic programs offered by universities. One reason for the financial squeeze is “administrative intensity,” which is colloquially known as “academic bloat.” One source of this bloat is suggested by public choice theory, which is that bureaucrats often act in their own interests by trying to maximize the size of their budgets and bureaucratic empires, even at the expense of the core mission of their university. Not only does such bloat raise costs, but it can also create “agency problems,” where the interests of the managers (i.e. the bureaucrats) diverge from the interests of the owners, as bureaucrats may prioritize protecting the interests of the university over the interests of academic programs (Tran et al., 2025).

Additionally, the marketization of higher education has led to a greater emphasis on tuition and private funding (McClure et al., 2024). which leaves universities and colleges open to shocks in student enrollment and economic instability. In some areas, tuition growth has led to increased unaffordability, and a perceived threat to the social function of higher education (Maguad, 2018).

The second issue is about quality assurance (QA) and regulation (Giller, 2023). Since the massification of higher education, new modes of educational delivery and new technologies are not captured by conventional QA arrangements. For example, it is not easy to ensure quality under conditions of rapid growth, especially when the new-generation university focuses on flexibility, diversity and student learning in ways that may be at odds with the existing, traditional standards (DURMUŞ, 2024). The other part of management problem is that there is no specific workforce for QA practices and inadequate governance structures which cannot embed the quality into the university’s strategic plan (Pushpakumara et al., 2023).

A “culture of compliance” has developed in these organisations where quality assurance is perceived as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a means of quality enhancement (Asamoah et al., 2025). Members of the faculty tend to regard quality assurance requirements as an additional task that takes them away from their core functions of teaching and research (Pushpakumara et al., 2023). This leads to a disconnect where an organisation can talk the language of being “for quality” without “doing quality” in its organisational practices (Maguad, 2018). The non-transparency of evaluations and challenges in evaluating the intangible aspects of educational quality make it more difficult to manage these processes (Pushpakumara et al., 2023).

The third management issue is digital transformation (Mabasa & Maluka, 2024). Although digitalisation can improve both the learning and administrative processes, the reality is that data is captured in silos and there is an absence of uniformity of information. Data, for instance, on research outputs of staff members, courses offered and university assets, is not interlinked and is therefore not always up to date. Such silo mentality will impede strategic management and the ability of the university to offer a unified digital experience to its students and employees (Maltese, 2018).

Furthermore, the shift to digital mode involves changes in the culture and operations of an institution (Mabasa & Maluka, 2024). Resistance from academics, who are not literate in the use of digital technology or those who do not value the technology to be in line with the pedagogy they value, has been noted as a challenge in several institutions (Tang et al., 2025). The hurried nature of the transition to digital operating mode, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the 'digital divide', as institutions were faced with the challenge of providing access to digital tools to students from diverse backgrounds (Mabasa & Maluka, 2024). Digital operating modes can also lead to a sense of seclusion and disconnection, when the diverse cultural identity of students is not part of the digital classroom (Ngqunguza et al., 2024).

Last but not least, the results indicated that, the two universities of each sector have the respective offices, staff and managers, but the management issues are significantly different between the public and the private sector, particularly, in the developing countries public universities experience political interference, the absence of collegiality and bureaucratic red tape that hinders them to be responsive to the needs of the labor market. On the other hand, the private ones, though relatively flexible and market-oriented, experience with poor compensation packages, insecurity of tenure and "ambiguity" in the appraisal system (Khan et al., 2018). Some private universities are built as business enterprises, thereby, overemphasis on the profit maximization at the cost of quality of education, and inaccessibility of meritorious candidates from the poor socio-economic backgrounds (Baban, 2021).

4. Strategic Management and Operational Solutions

In order to solve the above-mentioned problems, formal strategic management and operational models are being implemented in higher education. They should help the institution to identify its internal resources and capabilities to match the environmental opportunities and reduce the threats.

Strategic management in higher education is the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating plans to achieve long-term goals and fulfill the institution's mission. good strategic management allows HEIs to diagnose their weaknesses and threats and offers a rational foundation for decisions and resource allocation (Breaz & Jaradat, 2023). Mintzberg's 5Ps of Strategy includes Plan, Ploy, Pattern, Position, and Perspective (Mintzberg, 1987). This strategy model enables the university to look for a ploy beyond the plan, a pattern beyond the ploy, a position beyond the pattern, and a perspective beyond the position. Using the 5Ps framework, the university can identify the missing elements in their strategy and improve it to fill the existing gaps to meet stakeholder expectations and manage the scarcity of resources (Kambuga, 2025).

Another theory of interest is the Resource-Based View (RBV) which states that an organization gains a competitive advantage from resources that are valuable and unique (Barney, 1991). The valuable resources of a university would include its human capital (renowned professors), its technology, its research record and its culture (Baolong & Agapay, n.d.). Strategic management would then consist of the allocation of these resources to address external demands, for example a

university complying with a new government policy or to fulfill the needs of the labor market (Kambuga, 2025). Using the RBV theory, it is implied that rather than trying to follow the external trends, a university should concentrate on creating and maintaining its resources in order to keep itself going in times of change (Baolong & Agapay, n.d.).

Operational improvements are also being explored with the application of Lean Management principles. Lean Management has its roots in manufacturing, and is based on the idea of removing waste and continuously improving processes to provide the highest value for its stakeholders. In the context of a university, Lean principles can be applied to administrative processes like student registration, financial aid, and purchasing to reduce operational costs and increase the quality of services. Universities that have applied Lean methodologies have seen improvements in operational responsiveness and stakeholder satisfaction as administrative operations become more efficient and less bureaucratic (Baolong & Agapay, n.d.).

Another potential piece of the solution is to use big data analytics to inform administrators of organizational performance and student success. Through the use of data analytics tools, administrators will be able to more effectively decide how to allocate resources, develop new programs, and provide support for students. When leaders are able to use data analytics to guide their decisions, they are less likely to rely on hearsay and anecdotes, which can increase the likelihood of successfully navigating challenges to enact change. To properly use big data, however, the institution must ensure that it has data governance systems in place to protect privacy and ensure data quality and invest in training in order to build the technical capacity of staff to properly manage big data. (Baolong & Agapay, n.d.).

For financial sustainability, the importance of revenue diversification and financial resource management has been emphasized. The literature advises universities to develop their “third-stream” resources, including research funding, industry-university collaboration, donations, and commercial activities, to reduce their dependence on state funding (Absalom, 2024; Kimathi & Irungu, 2024). Revenue diversification has been proposed as an effective strategy for minimizing the risks of funding cuts and economic downturns (Kimathi & Irungu, 2024). However, diversification must be accompanied by robust financial management and financial governance practices, including financial disclosure and planning, to ensure that new revenue streams do not jeopardize the mission of the university (Imomov, 2025).

Furthermore, a change to accrual and cost accounting from the conventional cash accounting is suggested in order to enhance the financial visibility and accountability. Accrual accounting offers better and clearer view of the long-term financial situation of the institution as well as its capability to pay the future engagements (Altalibi, 2024). Healthy financial management includes the responsible use of debt, the retention of a satisfactory cash balance and the good balance of the costs to match the institutional goals in order to make sure the optimal utilization of the financial resources (Chen & Suwandej, 2025).

5. Leadership Development and Organizational Change

Strategic and operational responses, such as those outlined above, will only be effective if they are well-led and managed. The notion of academic leaders as first among equals is evolving into a more professionalized understanding that requires a certain set of competencies and skills (Dopson et al., 2019).

There is a movement within higher education leadership development towards transactional

leadership versus transformational leadership (Dopson et al., 2019). Transactional leadership is defined by task completion and exchange, which does not serve the significant changes the academy is experiencing (Lamm et al., 2021). In contrast, transformational leadership, however, includes having a vision, motivating others, and encouraging innovation and collaboration (Dopson et al., 2019). Transformational leaders have a high level of self-awareness, can work across the silos of the institution, and embody the core values of the institution. Transformational leadership has been proven to positively impact performance and achievement of goals, and is, therefore, a critical element in the change management of an institution (Lamm et al., 2021).

Specifically, LD (Leader Development) programs for university administrators must be situated within the academic environment. The academy is unique, characterized by academic autonomy, a sense of community, and the hybrid academic-manager role. LD programs can assist the willing hybrids, academics transitioning to leadership positions, to navigate the dissonance between discipline and administration (Dopson et al., 2019). Practical and theoretical learning activities such as service learning, internships, and group projects enable participants to build the skills necessary for leading in a complex setting (Tilstra, 2008).

Change management in a university setting is challenging as a result of the dispersed power among faculty and the difficulty in imposing management reforms (Kambuga, 2025). Accomplishing change requires that the leader communicates clearly (Salman & Broten, 2017), and that the change leader embraces the ideals of co-creation (Tierney, 2004). Ensuring change is transparent and stakeholders are engaged in the planning stages will increase the chances of success. Applying change models, such as Kotter's eight-step model, can guide the leader through the change process, from creating a sense of urgency to anchoring new changes (Kotter, 2012).

In addition to this, the reason why digital leadership exists as a relatively new area of study is that it aims to tackle issues specifically related to the digital transformation. Digital leaders should know how to lead within the socio-technical aspects of the digital age and, therefore, consider technology as a way to improve student learning experience and, at the same time, address equity and inclusion issues (Mabasa & Maluka, 2024). For instance, they should aim to develop a "digital mindset" in their teaching and administrative staff. Moreover, their digital projects should be aligned with the mission, vision and pedagogic priorities of the institution. According to the framework for digital transformation of Jisc, digital leaders and capability are key to success. In their model, they argue that a holistic approach considering the needs of all stakeholders is key to succeed in a digital transformation process (McGill, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The governance of higher education institutions is replete with paradoxes. There is the autonomy-accountability paradox: on the one hand, universities need to be autonomous in order to deliver on their research and teaching missions, on the other, they are subject to accountability mechanisms and regulations (Maguad, 2018). There is the paradox of collegiality-managerialism: the collegiality associated to shared governance and professional authority collides with the managerialism associated to administrative efficiency and market-oriented flexibility (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023). There is the paradox of tradition-innovation: universities are strongly grounded on tradition and cultural heritage, yet they are required to innovate at an ever-increasing pace to be fit for a digital and globalized world (Maguad, 2018).

Coping with these paradoxes calls for a management approach that is flexible and strategic. Management of paradoxes is about elaborating mechanisms in order to utilize preservation of core

values to manage the contradictions (Tabatoni et al., 2000). In other words, rather than picking one side of a paradox, leaders have to find ways to satisfy both sides of a paradox. For instance, strategic management can be employed to protect academic autonomy by enabling the institution to secure financial viability and to prove its value to the outside world.

The future there will be more emphasis on shared and collective leadership. The leadership theories of the past will not work to address the wicked problems that are facing higher education. The dominant heroic model will need to be replaced with a model of leadership that draws on the collective talents of the faculty and staff to achieve the vision for the institution. Furthermore, the shared leadership model will provide the institution with a sense of continuity as leadership will not be as likely to disappear when any one leaves the institution. In addition, when leaders are empowered to make decisions they will be more likely to feel a sense of responsibility for the institution and will be invested in the future of the organization (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

In addition, sustainability as a whole should be a key element in university management. Not only financial sustainability but also social and environmental sustainability. Universities are already expected to show their support for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their commitment to a sustainable future through their activities and programs. Accounting sustainability and sustainable investment are examples of good management that will be of importance to assure the commitment of the institutions to sustainability and to keep the public trust (Altalibi, 2024).

The digitalization process will further impact academia and will go beyond the digitalization of the universities and will involve the digitalization of the academies that would lead to the emergence of a new “hybrid” model of education that would unite the virtues of the two approaches that are physical and digital learning (Amghar & Benchekroun, 2026). It will also be important for management to consider to review their digitalization strategies on an ongoing basis, to ensure that digitalization aligns with the purpose of the institution, and that everyone in the university community feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Ngqunguza et al., 2024). The “platformization of research” and “commodification of knowledge” will be still one of the main concerns that would need to be dealt with proactively, by considering the digitalization of ethics and protection of intellectual assets (Marco Barzman et al., 2021).

To sum up, the 21st century poses significant governance problems for higher education institutions. In line with general trends in the 21st century, marketization, digitalization, and accountability create new challenges for the management of higher education institutions. Academic bloat, insecure funding, quality assurance, and digitalization mean that higher education institutions can no longer be governed by bureaucracy or collegiality alone, but that a more business-like approach to the 21st century university is needed.

Taking the more recent literature together, it seems that the answer to the question lies somewhere in between and consists of the combination of the different approaches. Tools and frameworks of strategic management, lean and evidence-based management, as well as income diversification are all needed to make the institution survive and function effectively. But all of them should be used in the context of transformational and shared leadership, with an understanding and respect for the particular academic values of the institution. Academic leaders should be developed as both human and social capital in order to educate and train a new generation of the "academic-managers" which are able to work in the political and socio-technical context of a contemporary academic institution.

In conclusion, the objective of management in higher education is not only to save the organization

from financial deficit but to sustain and expand the academic mission. In particular, it is essential to secure a good balance between administrative authority and academic freedom as well as to cultivate a work culture that adopts the principles of continuous improvement and stakeholder involvement. Only by doing so, university managers are likely to make their institutions strongholds for education and research in the face of growing uncertainty. There is no better time than now for university managers to convert all these multiple challenges into windows of opportunity for change.

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