Governance Decision-Making in Private Universities amid China's Higher Education Reform

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Abstract
Amid the ongoing reform of China's higher education system, the internal governance and decision-making mechanisms of private universities have emerged as critical determinants of educational quality and institutional sustainability. This study constructs an integrated analytical framework linking governance structure, decision-making processes, multi-stakeholder participation, digital governance, and governance performance. Drawing on questionnaire surveys and case studies of 45 private universities across 16 provinces, the research employs regression and structural equation modeling to test the proposed relationships. The findings indicate that all four governance dimensions exert significant positive effects on governance performance, with digital governance demonstrating the most substantial impact. Specifically, digitalization enhances decision transparency, procedural rationality, and institutional accountability, functioning as a key catalyst for governance modernization. Based on these insights, a four-dimensional optimization pathway is proposed—emphasizing balanced authority and responsibility, standardized procedures, collaborative participation, and digital empowerment. The study contributes empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives to the discourse on evidence-based and collaborative governance in China's private higher education sector.

Keywords: Internal governance; Digital governance; Decision-making mechanism; Private universities; Education reform

Introduction

Against the backdrop of a global shift in higher education from scale expansion to quality enhancement, and from administration-dominated management to collaborative governance involving multiple stakeholders, internal governance structures and decision-making mechanisms within universities have increasingly become key determinants of educational quality and sustainable development. At present, the modernization of the governance systems and capacities of China's private universities represents not only a process of improving internal governance models, but also a process of refining operational mechanisms, enhancing governance effectiveness, and addressing practical challenges encountered in institutional development (Ren & Chen, 2025).

Within this international context, the development logic of Chinese higher education has also undergone profound transformation. The Education Powerhouse Construction Plan (2024–2035) explicitly states that by 2035, China will have fully established a socialist education powerhouse with strong comprehensive support capacity, emphasizing the guidance and regulation of private education development. This strategic direction imposes higher requirements on private universities, compelling them to move beyond reliance on scale expansion and capital investment, and instead pursue connotative and sustainable development through enhanced internal governance capacity and improved decision-making quality.

Under China's existing administrative management framework which remains control-oriented the governance of private higher education is strongly influenced by administrative mandates, making educational administration an important external factor that shapes the internal management of private universities (Jin & Gong, 2016). Compared with public universities, private universities exhibit significant differences in ownership structure, composition of governance bodies, and methods of resource acquisition. Consequently, their operational performance is highly sensitive to the effectiveness of internal governance structures and decision-making mechanisms.

Amid growing supply-demand imbalances in higher education, intensifying student recruitment competition, and increasing environmental uncertainty, many private universities are facing challenges such as insufficient development momentum and short-term strategic orientation. In this context, whether internal governance decision-making mechanisms can operate in a scientific and effective manner has become a decisive factor influencing the ability of private universities to improve educational quality and achieve long-term development.

Based on this understanding, this study focuses on the internal governance and decision-making mechanisms of private universities within the broader framework of China's higher education reform agenda. It systematically examines their operational characteristics, constraining factors, and mechanisms of influence, and explores targeted and practical optimization pathways from the perspective of governance modernization. The purpose of this research is to deepen the understanding of internal decision-making mechanisms in higher education institutions, provide empirical evidence to enhance governance effectiveness and sustainability in private universities, and offer policy insights for improving the governance framework of private higher education in China.

Main Perspectives on Private University Governance Research

Research on the governance of private universities, both domestically and internationally, has primarily been conducted from the perspectives of governance theory, institutional arrangements, and organizational operational mechanisms. In Western higher education research, governance studies are largely grounded in governance theory, new public management theory, and stakeholder theory. These frameworks focus on the internal distribution of power, decision-making structures, and their interactions with external environments, emphasizing the importance of decentralized governance, multi-stakeholder participation, and accountability mechanisms in improving governance performance. Within this tradition, universities are viewed as complex organizations characterized by the interaction of multiple stakeholders, where governance performance depends on the rationality and degree of coordination in the allocation of rights and responsibilities among various governance actors.

In the Chinese context, research on the governance of private universities demonstrates distinctive institutional characteristics. Existing studies generally argue that the theoretical foundation of private university governance is primarily built upon corporate governance structure theory, stakeholder theory, and the modern university system theory, thereby forming an analytical framework adapted to the characteristics of China's higher education governance system (Shen, 2009). Specifically, corporate governance structure theory emphasizes the improvement of board systems and decision-making procedures to promote a relative separation between ownership and management rights, ensuring that governance decisions are both standardized and stable (Huang, 2017). Stakeholder theory underscores the need to balance the interests of multiple parties faculty, students, government, and social actors in the governance process, fostering a diversified participatory model that enhances legitimacy and inclusiveness (Chen et al., 2023). Meanwhile, modern university system theory highlights that private universities should, under the political leadership of Party committees, establish an internal governance structure characterized by the coordinated functioning of "decision-making, execution, and supervision," thus realizing the institutionalization and proceduralization of governance operations (Tang, 2025).

Overall, existing research provides valuable theoretical tools for understanding the governance structures of private universities. However, most studies remain focused on institutional frameworks and normative design, with relatively limited attention to how governance structures function in practice through decision-making mechanisms to influence governance performance.

Review of Domestic and International Research Status

Existing studies generally indicate that private universities continue to face a range of practical challenges in internal governance, particularly concerning decision-making mechanisms, power balance, and the implementation of supervisory systems. Compared with the relatively mature governance models of public universities, many private institutions still exhibit weaknesses in areas such as the completeness of their corporate governance structures, the effectiveness of Party organizations' political functions, and the establishment of internal democratic supervision mechanisms (Shi, 2025).

Domestic research primarily focuses on optimizing governance structures, exploring pathways for high-quality development, and improving risk control mechanisms. Drawing on stakeholder theory, scholars argue that as nonprofit organizations, universities should not be governed by a single entity but should instead achieve a balance of power and shared accountability through multi-stakeholder participation. Based on this view, researchers have proposed optimizing the composition of university boards by including representatives of faculty, students, and external experts in governance processes to prevent excessive concentration of power and closed decision-making (Zhu et al., 2018).

At the global level, the UNESCO report A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education represents one of the earliest and most systematic international studies on private higher education. The report highlights that private universities have evolved from being merely "supplementary institutions" to becoming structural pillars of national higher education systems. Effective governance in private higher education, it argues, should maintain a balance between autonomy and accountability, while governments should shift from being direct controllers to acting as regulators and facilitators (Bjarnason et al., 2009).

From a comparative perspective, countries such as the United States and Singapore have developed mature governance frameworks for private higher education. American private universities generally feature well-established corporate governance systems and diversified boards of trustees, emphasizing institutional autonomy and academic freedom. By contrast, France adopts a more administrative-centered model with strong presidential authority, whereas the United Kingdom and Germany favor governance structures grounded in academic collegiality, granting significant authority to senior faculty members. Despite these structural differences, scholars across contexts broadly agree that board oversight plays a vital role in maintaining governance accountability and performance.

In summary, while existing research has reached a certain consensus in identifying the structural challenges of private university governance, most analyses remain focused on institutional forms and structural characteristics. There is still a notable lack of systematic empirical research addressing how internal governance decision-making mechanisms function in practice and how they affect governance outcomes.

Digital Transformation and University Decision-Making Research

With the rapid development of information technology, digital governance has increasingly become a central topic in higher education governance research. Scholars generally agree that digital technologies can enhance governance transparency, streamline administrative processes, and support more evidence-based decision-making, thereby mitigating problems of information asymmetry and inefficiency that often characterize traditional governance models (Sule, 2025).

At the policy level, China has explicitly identified educational digitalization as a critical pathway toward educational modernization. The national policy document Opinions on Accelerating the Advancement of Educational Digitalization emphasizes that digital transformation should serve as a foundation for building an "education powerhouse" and drive innovation in governance methods. Against this policy backdrop, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly being integrated into university management and decision-making processes, providing new technical conditions for optimizing governance operations.

However, existing studies also point out that the adoption of digital tools alone does not automatically improve governance performance. Their actual impact depends heavily on the degree of institutional embedding and the organizational capacity for governance. Without a clear delineation of responsibilities and adequate institutional arrangements, digital platforms may remain at the level of administrative assistance rather than fundamentally transforming decision-making mechanisms (Jayabalan et al., 2022).

In the specific context of private universities, most current research still regards digital transformation primarily as a tool to improve managerial efficiency, while few studies systematically explore how digital technologies influence power allocation, decision-making procedures, and governance logic from the perspective of internal governance structures. As Coronel and Trigos argue, digital frameworks should not merely automate administrative processes but rather reframe the very logic of university governance through transdisciplinary integration and data-driven coordination (Coronel & Trigos, 2024).

This research gap provides an important theoretical and empirical entry point for this paper, which examines internal decision-making mechanisms in private universities through the lens of digital governance, aiming to uncover how digital tools reshape governance processes, enhance coordination, and improve institutional accountability.

Methodology

Based on the analytical framework of "governance structure, decision-making process, multi-stakeholder participation, digital governance, governance performance" constructed in the preceding discussion, this paper conducts a systematic study of the internal governance and decision-making mechanisms of private universities from both theoretical deduction and empirical verification perspectives. The aim is to reveal the interaction mechanisms among different governance elements and the pathways through which they affect governance performance. The overall research design is as follows:

First, through a systematic review of the literature and an analysis of relevant policy documents, the core variables and logical relationships of internal governance in private universities are clarified. The literature review was conducted using major academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, CNKI, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as private university governance, internal governance mechanism, decision-making process, stakeholder participation, and digital governance were employed. Publications from 2010 to 2025 were primarily considered to capture recent developments in higher education governance. Peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritative reports, and policy documents closely related to private higher education governance were included, while studies lacking empirical or theoretical relevance were excluded. Based on this review, hypotheses were proposed regarding the interactions among governance structure, decision-making process, multi-stakeholder participation, and digital governance.

Second, by combining questionnaire surveys with in-depth interviews, first-hand data were collected from different types of private universities regarding their governance practices, providing empirical support for the analysis. Finally, through quantitative statistical methods and qualitative comparative analysis, the study identifies the pathways through which governance structures, participatory mechanisms, and digital governance tools influence decision-making performance, while revealing their internal logic and variations.

Research methods:

- Literature Analysis: Systematic review of domestic and international research on higher education governance to identify analytical dimensions, define core variables, and construct research hypotheses.
- Questionnaire Survey: A stratified random sampling strategy was employed to ensure representativeness across regions, institutional levels, and types of private universities. The questionnaire covered five key dimensions: governance structure, decision-making procedures, participation mechanisms, digital governance, and governance performance.
- Interview Research: Six representative private universities—comprehensive, application-oriented, and industry-specific—were selected for semi-structured interviews with university presidents, board members, and faculty representatives. The interviews supplemented and contextualized the quantitative findings.

The survey was conducted between March and May 2025, yielding 298 valid responses from 45 private universities across 16 provinces in China. The sample includes 14 comprehensive universities (31%), 20 application-oriented undergraduate institutions (44%), and 11 vocational colleges (25%), reflecting a balanced distribution across regions and types.

Respondents comprised senior administrators (29.5%), middle-level managers (26.8%), faculty members (32.1%), and student representatives (11.6%). In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 board members and university presidents, providing rich qualitative data to interpret the quantitative results and enhance contextual understanding.

In summary, this study integrates theoretical modeling, quantitative survey, and qualitative comparison to form a coherent research design that bridges conceptual construction and empirical validation. This mixedmethods approach establishes a methodological foundation for subsequent analysis of the operational logic and optimization pathways of internal governance decision-making mechanisms in private universities.

Drawing on the governance dimensions proposed in Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance by the OECD (2019) including autonomy, accountability, participation, and performance orientation and integrating the system-level governance framework outlined in UNESCO's Governance of Higher Education Systems: Comparative Perspectives (2021), this study conceptualizes the internal governance decision-making mechanisms of private higher education institutions as comprising five core variables: governance structure, decision-making processes, multi-stakeholder participation, digital governance, and governance performance (OECD, 2019). The measurement indicators are informed by the above international governance dimensions and are further localized through reference to the Measures for the Formulation and Implementation of University Charters issued by the Ministry of Education of China, as well as expert interviews (UNESCO, 2021). The variables and measurement indicators are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables, Dimensions, and Measurement Indicators of Internal Governance Decision-Making

Variable Type	Primary Dimension	Representative Measurement Indicators
Governance Structure (X_1)	Rationality of power distribution; clarity of responsibilities; soundness of internal supervision mechanisms	Whether responsibilities between the board of directors and the president are clearly defined; absence of power overlap; establishment of independent audit and supervision committees
Decision-Making Process (X_2)	Procedural formalization; evidence-based decision-making	Existence of standardized decision-making procedures; use of data or research evidence; collective discussion and documentation of major decisions
Multi-Stakeholder Participation (X_3)	Breadth of participation; effectiveness of participation	Proportion of faculty and student representatives participating in university affairs; involvement of external trustees or experts; adoption rate of stakeholder feedback
Digital Governance (X_4)	Level of digital integration; data-driven capability; intelligent decision support	Establishment of digital decision-support platforms; application of AI-assisted decision tools; implementation of data security management policies
Governance Performance (Y)	Decision efficiency; organizational trust; legitimacy and adaptive capacity	Length of decision implementation cycle; organizational satisfaction and trust levels; perceived legitimacy of decisions; frequency of institutional updates and reforms

All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), where higher scores indicate better performance in the corresponding governance dimension.Prior to the formal survey, the questionnaire underwent expert review and a pilot test to ensure clarity of wording and comprehensibility of the items.To verify the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument, Cronbach's α coefficient and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test were employed. The results showed that all dimensions achieved Cronbach's α values above 0.80, the overall KMO value was 0.874, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). These results indicate that the scale possesses good internal consistency and structural validity, and can effectively capture the latent structural relationships of internal governance decision-making mechanisms in private universities.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Overall, the rationality of governance structures in the sampled private universities scored 3.12 out of 5, indicating a moderate level of institutional soundness. The average score for digital governance was slightly higher at 3.48, suggesting that while information technology infrastructure has been initially established, its integration into decision-making processes remains limited.

Specifically, approximately 62% of respondents believed that "board authority is excessively centralized," while 47% indicated that "the president's decision-making authority is constrained." Only 38% of institutions have established formal deliberative procedures, and 29% reported faculty participation in major decision-making processes. Additionally, 56% of private universities have adopted certain forms of digital systems, but these are primarily applied to administrative management rather than governance decision-making.

These preliminary findings indicate that significant imbalances persist in governance structures and decision-making mechanisms within private universities. The results are consistent with the proposed analytical framework of this study, which posits interactive and constraining relationships among governance structure, decision-making processes, and digital governance.

Correlation and Regression Analysis

To examine the relationships among the key variables, this study employed a multiple regression model formulated as follows:

$$Y=\beta 0+\beta 1X1+\beta 2X2+\beta 3X3+\beta 4X4+\varepsilon$$

Where Y represents governance performance, and X_1–X_4 correspond to governance structure, decision-making process, multi-stakeholder participation, and digital governance, respectively. The regression results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression Results of Internal Governance Decision-Making

Independent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	Significance (p)
Governance Structure (X_1)	0.285	0.002
Decision-Making Process (X_2)	0.312	0.001

Multi-Stakeholder Participation (X_3)	0.254	0.005
Digital Governance (X_4)	0.346	< 0.001
Constant	0.412	< 0.001

The results indicate that all four independent variables exert significant positive effects on governance performance. Among them, digital governance ($\beta = 0.346$) demonstrates the strongest influence, suggesting that digital technologies play a critical role in enhancing ***decision***-making rationality and operational efficiency. The decision-making process ($\beta = 0.312$) ranks second, highlighting the importance of procedural standardization and transparency in improving governance effectiveness.

These findings validate the core assumption of this study that digital governance and institutionalized decision-making jointly serve as key drivers of governance performance in private universities. The results also align with Marginson's (2016) concept of participatory governance, which emphasizes that transparency and collaborative decision-making mechanisms are essential mediators linking governance structure and organizational performance.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Results

To further examine the mediating and moderating relationships among the variables, a structural equation model was constructed using AMOS 26.0. The results indicate a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.54$, CFI = 0.936, RMSEA = 0.041). Specifically, the decision-making process exhibits a partial mediating effect between governance structure and governance performance (indirect effect = 0.173, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that governance structure indirectly enhances governance performance through the institutionalization of decision-making procedures. In addition, multi-stakeholder participation demonstrates a significant moderating effect on the relationship between digital governance and governance performance (moderating effect = 0.198, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the effectiveness of digital governance increases with broader participation. These findings elucidate the underlying mechanisms of governance: governance structure improves execution efficiency by establishing institutional constraints through standardized decision-making processes, while digital governance amplifies synergistic effects by enhancing information transparency and participatory interaction, thereby contributing to an overall improvement in governance performance.

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Theoretical Interpretation and Model Extension

Based on the empirical results presented in Chapter 3, the major influencing factors of governance performance in Chinese private universities are ranked as follows: digital governance ($\beta = 0.346$, $p < 0.001$), decision-making process ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.01$), governance structure ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.01$), and multi-stakeholder participation ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.01$). This finding reveals a distinctive feature of the governance landscape: technology-driven mechanisms have surpassed traditional organizational structures as the primary force shaping governance effectiveness in private universities (Mergel et al., 2019; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

This phenomenon can be explained through two theoretical mechanisms. First, digital governance acts as a "structural intermediary" in institutional execution and organizational coordination (Birnbaum, 2004). By enhancing information transparency and traceability in decision-making, it mitigates internal information asymmetry and facilitates the systemic integration of previously fragmented governance processes. This aligns with the "process-level regulatory mechanism" within the OECD's Input–Process–Outcome model of education governance (2019).

Second, digital governance demonstrates a "technological compensation effect", meaning that digital platforms partially substitute for underdeveloped institutional mechanisms by providing structural coordination and constraint functions. Consequently, digitalization indirectly enhances governance performance. This indicates that the modernization of governance in Chinese private universities is not merely a matter of structural design, but also a process of evolution in governance mechanisms. Balanced governance structures function through institutionalized decision-making procedures, and such procedures—when supported by digital technologies—achieve synergistic optimization. Together, they form a "structure–process–technology" composite governance system.

Comparative Analysis with Existing Studies

The findings of this study both align with and complement the international literature on private university governance across multiple dimensions. First, consistent with Marginson's model of *participatory governance*, this study empirically confirms a mediating chain of "information transparency–collaborative decision-making–performance enhancement (Marginson, 2016)". However, unlike the highly institutionalized culture of shared governance in universities in Europe and the United States, multi-stakeholder participation mechanisms in Chinese private universities remain characterized by a pronounced degree of formalism, with limited substantive involvement of faculty and students. This institutional context helps explain the relatively weaker empirical effects of multi-stakeholder participation observed in the analysis.

Second, Clark's *triangle of coordination* model posits that higher education governance requires a dynamic balance among the state, the market, and the academic community (Clark, 1983). The present study finds that Chinese private universities have developed an "administrative–market hybrid" power configuration within this triangle, in which macro-level state regulation coexists with the market-oriented orientation of boards of trustees. While this configuration enhances resource mobilization and allocation capacity, it simultaneously constrains decision-making autonomy and weakens the independence of internal supervision, thereby partially dampening the effect of governance structure on governance performance.

Finally, the results extend the discussion by Altbach and Levy on the global diversity of private higher education governance (Altbach & Levy, 2019). The digital governance trajectory observed in Chinese private universities demonstrates a degree of international foresight. Its data-driven characteristics offer a novel "institutional leapfrogging model" for education governance in developing countries, whereby technological embeddedness enables functional substitution for institutional deficiencies and contributes to improvements in governance efficiency.

Institutional Characteristics and Mechanism Interpretation

Governance structures in Chinese private universities are characterized by institutional hybridity and policy dependency. Legally, boards of trustees serve as the core of corporate governance; however, in practice, administrative authority often dominates daily decision-making, creating a dual-track governance system. This structural tension blurs power boundaries, weakens supervisory mechanisms, and consequently undermines governance performance.

Moreover, multi-stakeholder participation lacks stable institutional channels. Faculty and student participation typically depends on administrative approval or temporary consultation rather than embedded institutional mechanisms. Such informal collaboration limits the sustainability of participatory governance.

In contrast, digital governance demonstrates a “reverse empowerment effect”—technological systems often precede institutional frameworks, and the transparency of digital platforms compels organizations to adopt more formalized governance practices. In this sense, digital governance becomes an accelerator of institutionalization.

Mechanistically, this phenomenon can be explained through three intermediary processes:

1) Transparency mediation： Data disclosure reduces information asymmetry and enhances organizational trust.
2) Procedural mediation： Digital process management improves traceability and execution efficiency.
3) Accountability mediation：Data tracking mechanisms clarify responsibilities and strengthen risk control.

Thus, the optimization of governance in private universities should shift from institution-driven to mechanism-driven approaches, utilizing digital technology to achieve calculable, adaptive, and self-correcting governance processes.

Optimization Pathways and Practical Implications

Drawing upon the above theoretical and comparative analyses, this study proposes a four-dimensional optimization framework to guide the institutional modernization of private university governance and enhance long-term governance capacity: structural restructuring, procedural rationality, collaborative co-governance, and digital empowerment.

1) *Structural Restructuring: Clarifying Responsibilities and Building a Coordinated Governance System*

   The modernization of governance begins with the rational redesign of organizational structures. Clear delineation of responsibilities across governance levels—boards, presidents, and academic units—is essential. Lessons can be drawn from the U.S. “Governance and Audit Committee” model, establishing multi-tiered accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and efficiency.
2) Procedural Rationality: Data-Driven Decision Support

Governance capacity enhancement relies on the development of data-driven decision-support systems. Establishing an Institutional Research and Decision Analysis Center can integrate personnel, financial, and academic data to support evidence-based decision-making. Additionally, standardized documentation and tracking of decision-making processes can strengthen transparency and legitimacy.

3) Collaborative Co-Governance: Institutionalizing Participation

To transform formal participation into substantive collaboration, participation rights of faculty, students, and external experts should be institutionally guaranteed within university charters. Establishing University Consultation Committees and hosting Governance Open Days can encourage dialogue and multi-directional information sharing, fostering democratic and inclusive decision-making.

4) Digital Empowerment: Building an Intelligent Governance Ecosystem

Digital transformation serves as the primary driver of governance modernization. The construction of an integrated digital governance platform—leveraging blockchain for traceable data management and AI for risk prediction—can greatly enhance governance foresight and responsiveness. At the same time, robust data security and privacy protection mechanisms must be established to balance transparency with ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

Based on the analytical framework of "governance structure–decision-making process–multi-stakeholder participation–digital governance–governance performance," this study systematically examines the operational logic, underlying mechanisms, and optimization pathways of internal governance decision-making in Chinese private universities. The core argument is that the modernization of governance in private higher education should not be confined to the refinement of organizational arrangements; rather, sustained improvements in governance effectiveness require an integrated pathway of "structural optimization–process standardization–digital empowerment–collaborative governance culture." The empirical results demonstrate that clearly defined authority–responsibility boundaries, institutionalized decision-making procedures, substantive multi-stakeholder participation, and deeply embedded digital governance are critical determinants of enhanced governance performance. Among these factors, digital governance plays a pivotal mediating and driving role in promoting evidence-based decision-making, improving information transparency, and strengthening organizational trust. These findings not only corroborate the validity of the OECD's "input–process–output" governance model, but also provide context-specific empirical evidence and theoretical extension for governance research in Chinese private higher education.

Drawing on the empirical evidence, this study argues that governance optimization in private universities should be advanced simultaneously across institutional, technical, and cultural dimensions. At the institutional level, clearer delineation of authority and responsibility between boards of trustees and university presidents is required, alongside strengthened internal supervision and accountability mechanisms to ensure a rational and balanced distribution of power. At the process level, data-supported, evidence-oriented decision-making mechanisms and standardized deliberative procedures should be established to enhance transparency and traceability. At the technical level, the construction of digital governance platforms should be prioritized to promote the intelligent integration of information, processes, and performance evaluation, thereby forming a data-driven scientific decision-making system. At the cultural level, a shared governance culture should be cultivated by encouraging the substantive participation of faculty, students, and social representatives, fostering an open, consultative, and trust-based campus governance environment. Through this systematic optimization pathway, private universities can achieve internal improvements in governance effectiveness while externally reconciling social responsibility with organizational performance, thus injecting sustained momentum into the high-quality development of higher education.

The conclusions of this study are highly consistent with the core principles articulated in UNESCO's The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development. The report emphasizes that higher education institutions both public and private should serve as key agents of social responsibility and innovation, realizing public value through strengthened autonomy, accountability, and multi-stakeholder participation (UNESCO, 2009). The empirical findings of this study substantiate this proposition: with the advancement of digital empowerment and governance modernization, Chinese private universities are gradually forming an inclusive yet efficiency-oriented "collaborative governance model." Their governance logic is shifting from a management-centered approach toward collaborative co-governance, and from reliance on institutional constraints toward mechanism-driven innovation. This trajectory reflects the distinctive evolutionary path of higher education governance in China and offers valuable insights for the sustainable transformation of private higher education governance globally.

Nevertheless, this study is subject to several limitations. Due to constraints related to sample size and data availability, the analysis relies primarily on cross-sectional data and is therefore unable to fully capture the dynamic evolution of governance mechanisms in private universities. Moreover, although the latent variable indicators were refined through expert consultation and reliability testing, they require further validation through broader empirical applications. Future research may be extended in two main directions. First, longitudinal designs could be employed to uncover the causal mechanisms and temporal effects linking governance structure, digital governance, and governance performance. Second, cross-national comparative studies could be conducted to examine the adaptability and international comparability of China's private higher education governance modernization pathway under different institutional contexts. Looking ahead, as educational digitalization and governance modernization continue to accelerate, private universities are likely to advance toward a more scientific, open, and efficient governance paradigm through the integration of institutional innovation, technological empowerment, and collaborative governance culture, thereby contributing distinctive empirical evidence and theoretical insights to the sustainable development of higher education in China and beyond.

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