

Integrating Structure and Adaptability: A Framework for Higher Education Governance in the Digital Age

Yu Huijun

Educational Administration
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Bandung, Indonesia
525944683@qq.com

Abstract

Contemporary higher education institutions face a fundamental governance dilemma: they must maintain stable, accountable structures to ensure quality and legitimacy, while simultaneously developing adaptive capacities to respond to rapid technological, social, and economic changes. This tension is particularly acute in developing regions such as ASEAN, where universities must balance global standards with local relevance under constrained resources. This paper aims to develop an integrated governance framework that reconciles the competing imperatives of structural stability and adaptive responsiveness in higher education. Employing a conceptual synthesis methodology, the study critically reviews and integrates recent literature on university governance, digital transformation, and institutional resilience. The analysis culminates in a four-dimensional integrated governance framework, comprising: (1) Networked Collegiality in decision-making; (2) Contextualized Stewardship in operations; (3) Digitally-Enabled, Value-Guided Agility in information systems; and (4) Sustainability-Oriented Evaluation for legitimacy building. The framework demonstrates that effective governance is not a binary choice between structure and adaptability, but rather their strategic integration. By operationalizing this integration across core institutional dimensions, the framework provides a practical blueprint for cultivating the "contextually intelligent university"—an institution capable of coherent action amidst complexity. The paper contributes to both scholarly discourse and policy practice by offering principle-based design guidelines that are globally informed yet locally adaptable, with specific relevance to higher education systems in Indonesia and the broader ASEAN region.

Keywords: Higher education governance; Adaptive university; Institutional resilience; Digital transformation; Stakeholder engagement

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide operate in a paradigm of permanent flux. Pressures stemming from technological disruption (notably artificial intelligence and data analytics), shifting economic models, heightened public accountability, and complex societal demands have rendered traditional, hierarchical governance models increasingly inadequate (Bohlens, 2024; Read & Olcott, 2025). The core dilemma for contemporary governance lies in reconciling the necessity for coherent structure ensuring quality, equity, financial integrity, and the preservation of academic values with the equally critical need for

organizational adaptability enabling innovation, swift response to change, and contextual relevance. This tension is acutely felt in regions like Indonesia and across ASEAN, where HEIs must simultaneously engage with global academic standards, national development agendas, and local community needs, often within constrained resources and under centralized regulatory oversight.

This paper posits that transcending this perceived dichotomy is the key to future-ready governance. Moving beyond debates that pit bureaucratic control against entrepreneurial freedom (Clark, 1998; Marginson & Considine, 2000), we advocate for an integrated governance framework. This framework is designed to harness the strengths of structured processes (e.g., clear policy frameworks, robust quality assurance) to provide stability and legitimacy, while deliberately embedding adaptive mechanisms (e.g., flexible resource allocation, participatory foresight, digital feedback loops) to foster resilience and innovation. The discussion is situated within the specific context of the Doctoral Program in Educational Management, contributing to the ongoing scholarly and practical discourse on advancing governance efficacy in dynamic educational landscapes. By synthesizing global trends with local imperatives, this paper aims to provide a actionable roadmap for leaders and policymakers navigating the complexities of 21st century higher education.

The scholarship on higher education governance has evolved to address the complexities of modern universities, converging around several key themes: the search for new theoretical models, the transformative role of digitalization, the persistent tension between competing imperatives, and the nuances of governance in specific contexts like China and other rapidly developing systems.

Modern university governance is underpinned by theories such as governance theory (emphasizing multi-stakeholder participation), stakeholder theory (focusing on balancing diverse interests), and new institutionalism (explaining organizational isomorphism) (Trow, 2010). A significant development is the reconceptualization of the "adaptive university." (Sporn, 2025) refines this model by proposing three ideal types: the Resilient Model (focusing on stability and core mission continuity), the Strategic Model (proactively aligning with environmental changes), and the Innovative Model (actively shaping the environment through entrepreneurship). This typology moves beyond a one-size-fits-all understanding of adaptability, suggesting that governance structures must align with an institution's specific strategic orientation and environmental challenges. Recent extensions of this work explore hybrid models that combine elements of these types, acknowledging that institutions may need to exhibit different adaptive postures in different domains such as being resilient in core academic functions while being innovative in community engagement or digital learning initiatives.

Digitalization is a dominant theme, heralded as a new paradigm for governance (Du & Niu, 2024; Lin et al., 2025; OECD, 2019). Proponents argue that data-driven decision-making can enhance transparency, efficiency, and personalization, breaking down traditional information "silos" (Zhang, 2024). Digital tools enable real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and more nuanced stakeholder engagement. However, critical scholarship warns against "technological solutionism." (Zhang, 2024) argues that an over-reliance on digital tools, without a parallel shift in governance philosophy, can exacerbate existing problems. For instance, digitizing a performance evaluation system rooted in strict "performance accountability" may

simply make "quantified evaluation" more efficient and oppressive, rather than fostering trust and intrinsic motivation. This highlights that digital governance is not merely a technical upgrade but must be guided by a shift from "instrumental rationality" to "value rationality" (Zhang, 2024

). The ethical dimensions of data use, algorithmic bias, and digital equity have thus become central concerns, requiring governance frameworks that embed ethical scrutiny and human oversight into technological systems.

The literature identifies persistent tensions that governance systems must navigate: Legitimacy vs. Distinctiveness: Organizations often mimic successful models to gain legitimacy, leading to institutional isomorphism (Liu, 2025). In higher education, this manifests as local universities uncritically imitating "world-class university" blueprints, which may suppress institutional distinctiveness and erode long-term competitiveness (Liu, 2025). The pressure to conform to global rankings and accreditation standards can homogenize missions and curricula, undermining the unique value proposition that many institutions, particularly in the Global South, offer to their local contexts (Bohlens, 2025; Ntjamba & Ashipala, 2025).

Accountability vs. Autonomy: The proliferation of rankings, audits, and performance-based funding models strengthens external accountability but can encroach on professional and institutional autonomy, potentially distorting academic priorities (Bie, 2025; Re-examination of the Modernization, 2025). This tension is particularly pronounced in systems where state control is strong, as the drive for accountability can stifle academic freedom and bottom-up innovation.

Global Standards vs. Local Relevance: Universities are pressured to compete on global benchmarks while simultaneously addressing local and national development needs, creating a complex "glonacal" pull on governance priorities (Bie, 2025). This dual mandate requires governance structures that can strategically translate global knowledge and standards into locally meaningful actions and outcomes, such as tailoring research agendas to solve regional problems or designing curricula that equip graduates for both local employment and global citizenship.

China's governance reform presents a unique case study, characterized by a dual emphasis on institutional construction and standardized operations. Key trajectories include building a modern university system with Chinese characteristics, where massification has made quality assurance a central governance concern (Trow, 2010). Current reform focuses on deep-seated challenges: moving from "tool governance" to "value governance" (Zhang, 2024), reconstructing grassroots academic production relations to unleash faculty vitality, optimizing the "President Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Committee", and further clarifying the government-university relationship to realize substantive institutional autonomy (Re-examination of the Modernization, 2025). These efforts reflect a broader struggle to balance socialist educational principles with the operational demands of world-class university building, offering valuable lessons on integrating political, academic, and administrative logics within a single governance framework. Similar tensions between state direction and institutional autonomy are observable, albeit in different forms, in many other national systems, including Indonesia.

The contemporary landscape of higher education governance is a crucible where profound global forces and intricate local imperatives converge, creating an environment of unprecedented complexity and

dynamism. This context is shaped by three powerful, interwoven macro-trends. First, the digital and technological transformation, propelled by artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and ubiquitous connectivity, is fundamentally redefining the core functions of the university. This shift transcends mere administrative efficiency; it demands a strategic reconceptualization of pedagogy (e.g., personalized and hybrid learning), research collaboration (e.g., open science and virtual labs), knowledge dissemination, and student support services, thereby necessitating agile policy responses and novel ethical frameworks for data governance and algorithmic accountability (Du & Niu, 2024; Lin et al., 2025; OECD, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a massive accelerator, forcing rapid adoption of digital tools and exposing both their potential and their pitfalls, such as digital divides and teacher burnout.

Second, the tectonic shift in economic and accountability models continues to reshape institutional priorities. The trend towards marketization, performance-based funding, and heightened demands for demonstrable value-for-money compels HEIs to quantify their impact and articulate their relevance to a skeptical public and cost-conscious governments (Marginson & Considine, 2000). This financial reality often redefines the traditional social contract between universities, the state, and private stakeholders, pushing governance towards more entrepreneurial and externally accountable forms (Clark, 1998; Marginson & Considine, 2000). In many countries, declining public funding has increased dependence on tuition fees, industry partnerships, and international student recruitment, introducing new risks and dependencies that governance systems must manage (Waring, 2024).

Third, the expanding mandate of the "third mission" and social impact places new pressures on HEIs. Universities are increasingly expected to be not just ivory towers of knowledge but active, embedded agents of sustainable development, regional innovation, and social cohesion. This role demands governance mechanisms that can facilitate deep, reciprocal engagement with diverse communities, industries, and civic bodies (Hoareau McGrath et al., n.d; Xie & Xiao, 2025). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have provided a common framework for articulating and measuring this impact, further integrating global agendas into local institutional strategies.

This global panorama is further complicated when refracted through the specific prism of national and regional contexts, such as Indonesia and the broader ASEAN community. Here, the aforementioned global pressures intersect with distinctive local realities. HEIs must skillfully navigate often-centralized national regulatory frameworks and accreditation systems while simultaneously advocating for and exercising greater institutional autonomy to respond to local needs [9]. They face the challenge of integrating diverse, sometimes competing, stakeholder interests—ranging from national ministries and accreditation boards to local industry partners, indigenous communities, and rapidly growing student populations. Moreover, many institutions are engaged in a delicate balancing act: striving to enhance their global visibility and competitiveness by climbing international rankings, while remaining fundamentally committed to addressing pressing local and national development agendas, such as workforce upskilling, cultural preservation, and inclusive access (Bie, 2025). This intricate interplay between global convergence and local particularity makes the search for governance models that are both structurally legitimate and contextually meaningful not merely an academic exercise, but an urgent practical necessity for institutional sustainability

and relevance in the ASEAN region and beyond.

While the governance challenges facing higher education institutions have been extensively documented, existing scholarship tends to examine structural stability and adaptive capacity as separate or even competing paradigms. Studies on university governance often emphasize either bureaucratic accountability mechanisms or entrepreneurial innovation, with limited attention to how these imperatives might be systematically integrated within a coherent framework. Furthermore, despite growing recognition of digital transformation's impact, few studies have operationalized how digital tools can simultaneously serve both structural integrity and adaptive responsiveness. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of developing higher education systems, such as those in Indonesia and ASEAN, where institutions must navigate global standards, national regulations, and local community needs simultaneously.

This study aims to fill this gap by developing an integrated governance framework that deliberately synthesizes structure and adaptability rather than treating them as trade-offs. Specifically, the research seeks to achieve three interconnected objectives: First, to critically deconstruct the perceived dichotomy between structural stability and adaptive capacity in higher education governance. By synthesizing insights from governance theory, organizational studies, and digital transformation literature, this objective seeks to reveal how these seemingly opposing forces can be reconceptualized as complementary dimensions of institutional resilience.

Second, to construct a coherent governance framework that purposefully integrates both imperatives across four core institutional dimensions: decision-making architecture, implementation and operations, information and digital governance, and evaluation and legitimacy. This framework aims to provide not merely a theoretical synthesis but a practical blueprint that specifies the structural components, adaptive components, and integrative mechanisms for each dimension. Third, to examine the implications of adopting such an integrated framework for institutional leadership, policy formulation, and strategic development. Particular attention is paid to the unique conditions, constraints, and opportunities within the Indonesian and broader ASEAN higher education context, offering contextualized pathways for adaptation and implementation.

By pursuing these objectives, the study contributes to both scholarly discourse and policy practice. Theoretically, it advances the emerging concept of the "contextually intelligent university" by operationalizing how institutions can simultaneously maintain accountability and foster innovation. Practically, it offers principle-based design guidelines that are globally informed yet locally adaptable, addressing a critical need in developing higher education systems seeking to enhance their resilience and relevance in the digital age.

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual synthesis methodology, appropriate for theory-building research that seeks to integrate disparate bodies of literature into a coherent framework. The approach involves three interrelated phases. First, a critical review of relevant literature was conducted across four key domains: higher education governance theory, organizational adaptation and resilience, digital transformation in

educational settings, and comparative governance studies in ASEAN contexts. The review aimed to identify core concepts, persistent tensions, and emerging themes that could inform framework development.

Second, an iterative process of framework construction was undertaken. Drawing on insights from the literature review, preliminary dimensions of governance were identified and refined through constant comparison with empirical cases and theoretical models. This process involved moving between abstract principles and concrete governance challenges, ensuring that the framework remained both conceptually robust and practically relevant. Third, the framework was illustrated and validated through reference to diverse institutional contexts. While not constituting empirical testing, this illustrative approach demonstrates the framework's applicability across different governance settings and provides a foundation for future empirical research.

Results and Discussion

The central thesis emerging from this conceptual synthesis is that the resilience and efficacy of higher education governance in the 21st century depend on transcending the conceptual and practical impasse of the structure-adaptability dichotomy. Rather than treating them as opposing forces in a zero-sum game, the path forward lies in their deliberate and synergistic integration. This integration must be operationalized across the core, interdependent dimensions of institutional life. The proposed framework, detailed in Table 1, provides a blueprint for this integration, specifying the structural and adaptive components for each dimension and the unifying mechanism that binds them together.

Table 1: The Integrated Governance Framework: Dimensions and Mechanisms

Governance Dimension	Structural Component (For Stability & Accountability)	Adaptive Component (For Responsiveness & Innovation)	Integrated Mechanism & Rationale
1. Decision-Making Architecture	Clear constitutional documents (charters, statutes); Defined roles & remits for Senate, Council, academic boards; Formal committee structures.	Inclusive stakeholder forums (industry, alumni, local community); Horizon-scanning & scenario-planning units; Delegated authority for pilot initiatives; Digital platforms for idea crowdsourcing.	Networked Collegiality: This mechanism supplements traditional, legally-mandated bodies with fluid, cross-boundary task forces and advisory panels. It balances the clarity and legitimacy of formal structures with the agility, diversity of thought, and external connectivity needed to address novel challenges and seize emerging opportunities.

2. Implementation & Operations	Standardized institutional policies & quality assurance (QA) protocols; Transparent financial controls & HR regulations; Centralized procurement & IT standards.	Flexible, mission-aligned resource allocation (e.g., strategic investment funds); Incentives for interdisciplinary collaboration & community projects; Rapid prototyping & review cycles for new programs; Empowered middle management.	Contextualized Stewardship: This moves beyond uniform compliance. While core principles and fiscal integrity are non-negotiable, it allows schools, departments, and research centers to define context-specific performance metrics and improvement pathways. It empowers units to tailor operations to their unique mission (e.g., a marine biology center focusing on coastal ecosystem impact versus citation counts), thereby fostering innovation and ownership.
3. Information & Digital Governance	Robust, integrated enterprise systems (ERP, LMS, CRM); Comprehensive cybersecurity, data privacy, and ethical AI use policies; Institutional data warehouse.	Advanced learning analytics for proactive student support; AI-driven tools for strategic forecasting and resource modeling; Open data portals for public engagement; "Digital twin" simulations for campus planning.	Digitally-Enabled, Value-Guided Agility: This dimension ensures technology serves the mission, not dictates it. The structural foundation guarantees data integrity, security, and interoperability—the bedrock of trust. The adaptive layer leverages this foundation to generate insights, personalize experiences, and model futures. Crucially, all digital tools are governed by a value-oriented philosophy that prioritizes pedagogical enhancement, equity, and social good over mere efficiency or surveillance.

4. Evaluation & Legitimacy	Mandatory periodic accreditation cycles; Internal audit against strategic plans; Standardized key performance indicators (KPIs) for reporting.	Multi-dimensional impact assessments (aligned with SDGs, social return on investment); Real-time stakeholder feedback channels (e.g., dynamic surveys, partnership reviews); Narrative-rich case studies of institutional impact.	Sustainability-Oriented Evaluation: This transforms evaluation from a backward-looking compliance exercise into a forward-looking learning and legitimacy-building system. It balances the necessity of meeting external accountability standards with a genuine, evidence-based assessment of the institution's long-term contribution to societal and environmental well-being. This dual focus helps build a more resilient and socially-grounded form of legitimacy.
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The proposed framework operates as an interconnected system designed to generate institutional "contextual intelligence." The journey begins with the Decision-Making Architecture, where the principle of Networked Collegiality is vital. Formal statutes and boards provide essential legal authority and ensure continuity, preventing governance from becoming capricious. However, supplementing these with adaptive structures—such as a standing Community Advisory Council or a temporary task force on Generative AI in education—injects vital external perspectives, specialized expertise, and real-time feedback into the decision-making process. This prevents strategic insularity and ensures that institutional choices are informed by a nuanced understanding of both internal capabilities and external environmental shifts, thereby enhancing relevance and social license. A university in Java, for instance, might use such a network to decide how to integrate local wisdom (kearifan lokal) into its curriculum while also meeting international standards.

Building upon this foundation of informed and inclusive governance, the framework addresses the critical layer of Implementation & Operations. Here, the mechanism of Contextualized Stewardship is key to resolving the tension between necessary standardization and necessary innovation. While centralized policies ensure fairness, consistency, and risk management, they can stifle the initiative of academic units if applied dogmatically. Contextualized stewardship champions a subsidiary approach. For example, the institutional QA framework may set a universal standard for "research impact," but a Faculty of Vocational and Applied Sciences would be empowered to demonstrate this through patents, industry partnerships, and graduate employment metrics, while a Faculty of Basic Sciences might emphasize fundamental discoveries and high-profile publications. This flexibility allows diverse units to excel on their own terms, driving mission-driven innovation rather than encouraging isomorphic mimicry that erodes institutional

distinctiveness (Liu, 2025). It requires trust in middle leadership and sophisticated performance dialogue rather than simple metric reporting.

The effective execution of these contextualized operations is increasingly dependent on the third dimension: Information & Digital Governance. This dimension demands a sophisticated balance, advocating for Digitally-Enabled, Value-Guided Agility. The structural components—secure, integrated data systems—are non-negotiable prerequisites for modern administration and for building a "single source of truth." Upon this reliable foundation, the adaptive components unleash the strategic potential of data: predictive analytics can identify students at risk long before they fail; simulation models can test the financial and pedagogical outcomes of a proposed new campus; digital platforms can facilitate global research collaboration (Du & Niu, 2024; Lin et al., 2025; OECD, 2019). However, this dimension explicitly incorporates the critical caution from the literature: technology must be a tool in service of humanistic and pedagogical values. Governance must actively guard against the "technocratic pitfall," where the ease of measuring something (e.g., login frequency, click-through rates) mistakenly elevates it to a core institutional value, thereby distorting educational and research priorities (Zhang, 2024). Therefore, policies on ethical AI use and data governance committees are essential structural safeguards.

Finally, the governance cycle is closed, validated, and legitimized through the fourth dimension: Evaluation & Legitimacy. The mechanism of Sustainability-Oriented Evaluation represents a paradigm shift. It acknowledges that while compliance with accreditation standards is essential for operational legitimacy, it is insufficient for building enduring societal trust and support. Therefore, it expands the evaluative lens to systematically assess the institution's contribution to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), its role in regional economic and social development, and its environmental footprint. By measuring and communicating its broader impact—through community health initiatives, cultural preservation projects, or start-up incubators—a university transitions from being seen as a cost center to being recognized as an indispensable partner in societal progress (Hoareau McGrath et al., n.d; Xie & Xiao, 2025). This builds a deeper, more resilient form of legitimacy that can withstand fluctuations in public funding and political sentiment, securing the institution's long-term standing. For an Indonesian university, this might mean tracking its contribution to reducing stunting in the local community or to preserving intangible cultural heritage, alongside its graduation rates.

In synthesis, the power of this integrated framework lies in the virtuous cycle it creates. An institution employing Networked Collegiality is better equipped to sense early signals of change from its environment. Through Contextualized Stewardship, it can translate these signals into tailored, innovative responses at the operational level. Digitally-Enabled Agility provides the tools to implement these responses efficiently and at scale, while Sustainability-Oriented Evaluation measures the true impact, facilitates organizational learning, and communicates value, thereby securing the ongoing resources and social capital needed for the next cycle of adaptation. This dynamic, self-reinforcing system is the hallmark of the truly contextually intelligent and resilient university.

Conclusion

The pursuit of effective higher education governance in the 21st century is an exercise in managing creative tension, not eliminating it. This paper concludes that the path forward does not lead to a single, rigid model but to a principle-based, yet flexibly orchestrated, integrated system. The proposed framework advocates for governance that is simultaneously structured enough to ensure accountability, preserve academic integrity, and safeguard the university's enduring mission, while being adaptive enough to navigate technological disruption, respond to evolving societal needs, and thrive amidst unexpected global challenges. For policymakers, system leaders, and institutional governors, this implies a fundamental shift in focus: from designing perfect, static governance charts to building dynamic governance capacities and fostering a culture of strategic agility. Key recommendations emerging from this analysis include:

Investing in Leadership Development: Equipping administrators and academic leaders with the skills to manage complexity, reconcile value tensions, facilitate networked collaboration, and steward contextualized innovation. **Creating Enabling Policy Environments:** National regulators can create legal and policy "sandboxes" that allow institutions to experiment with new governance forms, flexible funding models, and innovative programs safely, within a framework of overall accountability. **Value-Guided Digitalization:** Ensuring that digitalization strategies are explicitly guided by and subservient to core educational values (pedagogy, equity, ethics), not just efficiency gains. This requires investing in digital literacy and establishing ethics review boards for learning analytics and AI applications. **Redesigning Incentive Systems:** Moving beyond narrow bibliometric and ranking-based funding and evaluation. Systems should reward both academic quality and demonstrable, contextualized societal impact, encouraging universities to play to their strengths and serve their communities.

Fostering a Learning-Oriented Governance Culture: Embedding regular reflective practice, external scanning, and evidence-informed review into governance routines at all levels. Ultimately, the governance of higher education must itself become a learning process—reflexive, evidence-informed, and perpetually evolving to competently steward universities in their vital, multifaceted role as stewards of knowledge, catalysts for responsible innovation, and indispensable servants of a sustainable and equitable society. The integrated framework presented here offers a conceptual and practical starting point for this essential journey, particularly for institutions in regions like ASEAN that are navigating the complex intersection of global standards and local imperatives.

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