Christian Grosch[1]

Adapting to Disruption: A Case Study of Project-Based and AI-Integrated Curriculum Innovation at Coburg University

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) face structural pressures from digital transformation, labor market shifts, and declining enrollment. This exploratory case study analyzes the bachelor program *Information Systems 2.0* at Coburg University of Applied Sciences, drawing on document analysis and insider perspectives. Findings show that the program strategically integrates regional engagement, AI-driven project-based learning, and interdisciplinary governance. However, tensions emerge between employability and theoretical depth, agile program design and accreditation requirements, and expanded faculty roles versus institutional capacity. By situating the case within contingency and institutional theory, the paper provides empirically grounded insights into how universities navigate competing logics of academic autonomy, market responsiveness, and organizational legitimacy during digital disruption.

Keywords

higher education curriculum development, business informatics, institutional innovation, project-based learning, regional development

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1   Corresponding Author; Hochschule Coburg; christian.grosch@hs-coburg.de

Christian Grosch

Anpassung an Umbrüche: Eine Fallstudie zur projektbasierten und KI-integrierten Lehrplaninnovation an der Hochschule Coburg

Zusammenfassung

Hochschuleinrichtungen stehen aufgrund der digitalen Transformation, Veränderungen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt und rückläufigen Einschreibungszahlen unter strukturellem Druck. Diese explorative Fallstudie analysiert den Bachelor-Studiengang *Wirtschaftsinformatik 2.0* an der Hochschule Coburg anhand von Dokumentenanalysen und Insiderperspektiven. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Studiengang strategisch regionales Engagement, KI-gestütztes projektbasiertes Lernen und interdisziplinäre Governance integriert. Es entstehen jedoch Spannungen zwischen Beschäftigungsfähigkeit und theoretischer Tiefe, agiler Programmgestaltung und Akkreditierungsanforderungen sowie erweiterten Aufgaben der Fakultät und institutionellen Kapazitäten. Durch die Einordnung des Falles in die Kontingenz- und Institutionentheorie liefert die Arbeit empirisch fundierte Einblicke, wie Universitäten während der digitalen Disruption mit konkurrierenden Logiken wie akademischer Autonomie, Marktreaktionsfähigkeit und organisatorischer Legitimität umgehen.

Schlüsselwörter

Hochschulbildung, Lehrplanentwicklung, Wirtschaftsinformatik,
institutionelle Innovation, projektbasiertes Lernen, regionale Entwicklung

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly facing structural pressures from digital transformation, evolving labor markets, and changing social conditions (Leišytė et al., 2023; Martin & Xie, 2022). These pressures challenge traditional curricula, teaching methods, and institutional governance, prompting universities to explore innovative approaches that integrate technological competencies, interdisciplinary learning, and regional engagement (Marginson, 2016; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Roper, 2012; Sterling, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

This paper examines the bachelor program *Information Systems 2.0* at *Coburg University of Applied Sciences*, launched in Winter Semester 2022/23. The program was developed collaboratively by university leadership and regional industry stakeholders to address emerging digital skill needs, foster project-based learning, and embed *artificial intelligence* (AI) across the curriculum (Coburg University, 2025a; Aliabadi et al., 2023; McDowell, 2020). Unlike conventional business informatics programs, it combines modular, applied learning with close industry collaboration, aiming to prepare graduates for dynamic professional environments while contributing to regional innovation.

The study employs an exploratory case study design, combining document analysis (module handbook), participant observation, and insights from the author's direct involvement as program coordinator and lecturer. This approach enables an understanding of the structural, pedagogical, and governance dimensions of curriculum innovation.

The paper addresses two research questions:

- *How do competing institutional logics, specifically the drive for agile innovation versus the requirements of regulatory stability, manifest as structural tensions during the implementation of the "Information Systems 2.0" program?*

- *What strategic and governance-level lessons can be derived for HEIs seeking to institutionalize project-based, technology-driven curricula within highly regulated academic environments?*

By integrating theory and empirical evidence, this study highlights the trade-offs, structural conditions, and governance challenges associated with curricular innovation, offering insights for both research and practice in higher education development.

2 Theoretical Framework

To understand how Coburg University's *Information Systems 2.0* program navigates digital disruption, project-based pedagogy, and AI integration, this study draws on complementary theoretical perspectives from organizational and higher education research.

Contingency Theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) provides a lens for examining alignment between internal structures and external demands. There is no universally optimal curriculum design; instead, institutions must adapt teaching formats, governance structures, and resource allocation to environmental pressures. In this case, the modular, project-based curriculum represents a deliberate response to regional labor market demands and the challenges of digital transformation.

Institutional Theory (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) explains how innovation is constrained by broader academic norms, accreditation standards, and legitimacy concerns. HEIs adopt new practices not only to increase effectiveness but also to maintain legitimacy among regulators, industry partners, and students. The retention of traditional lecture modules alongside innovative projects illustrates that curricular change occurs within, rather than outside, established institutional frameworks.

Strategic Management Perspectives (Clark, 1998; Siegel & Leih, 2018) highlight the university as a purposive organization capable of shaping its environment. The *Information Systems 2.0* program exemplifies strategic entrepreneurship in higher education: aligning academic offerings with regional economic needs, technological trends, and emerging skill requirements while leveraging faculty and industry networks.

Learning Organization Paradigm (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Astley & Van de Ven, 1983) offers a pedagogical lens, emphasizing continuous feedback, reflection, and iterative project supervision. These processes enable both students and faculty to develop adaptive competencies, reinforcing the program's dual role as curriculum innovation and mechanism for organizational learning (Dee & Leišytė, 2016).

Together, these frameworks provide a multi-dimensional lens to analyze how *Information Systems 2.0* balances structural design, pedagogy, faculty roles, and institutional constraints, and how it responds to disruption while maintaining legitimacy and educational quality.

3   Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory single-case study design to analyze the development and early implementation of the *Information Systems 2.0* bachelor's program at *Coburg University of Applied Sciences*. Exploratory case studies are particularly suitable when investigating emerging organizational models and innovation processes that have not yet been extensively examined in the literature (Toma, 2010; Dee & Leišytė, 2016).

The case was selected due to its explicit strategic repositioning in response to digital transformation pressures and its integration of AI-driven project-based learning within a regional innovation context. Since the program has been operational only since the winter semester 2022/23, the analysis focuses on its design logic, governance structures, and early-stage implementation dynamics rather than long-term outcome evaluation.

The primary data sources include:

- The official module handbook and curriculum documentation (2022–2025 editions)

- Internal program development documents

- Strategic planning materials related to the Lucas-Cranach-Campus initiative

- Reflexive insights derived from the author's direct involvement in program development and coordination

The combination of documentary analysis and insider perspective enables a detailed reconstruction of the program's conceptual foundations and governance structures.

The author serves as program coordinator and lecturer within *Information Systems 2.0* and was directly involved in its conceptualization and implementation. The author's embedded role offers privileged access but requires careful reflexivity to mitigate normative bias. Analytical distance is maintained through application of established organizational and higher education theories.

To mitigate this limitation, the analysis is explicitly grounded in established organizational and higher education theories. Rather than presenting the program as a best-practice model, the study critically examines structural tensions, trade-offs, and governance challenges inherent in its design. The theoretical framework functions as an analytical lens to ensure conceptual distance and avoid purely descriptive or promotional accounts.

Given the program's recent implementation, empirical outcome data such as graduate employability or longitudinal student trajectories are not yet available. The findings therefore remain preliminary and focus on structural and strategic dimensions rather than measurable performance indicators. Furthermore, the insider perspective, while analytically valuable, limits the degree of external triangulation. Future research should incorporate independent empirical studies, including student and stakeholder perspectives.

4 Case Context

The bachelor's program *Information Systems 2.0* was launched in the winter semester 2022/23 against the backdrop of declining student enrollments and increasing regional demands for digitally skilled graduates. The initiative emerged through collaboration between university leadership and regional economic stakeholders, reflecting both strategic repositioning efforts and resource dependence dynamics (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Roper, 2012). Rather than representing purely academic innovation, the program can be understood as an institutional response to demographic pressure and regional economic expectations (Rebhan, 2024).

The program is located at the *Lucas-Cranach-Campus* in Kronach, a region characterized by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) undergoing digital transformation. Its design deliberately emphasizes project-based learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and applied AI integration (Aliabadi et al. 2023). Nearly all ECTS credits are formally embedded in project-oriented formats. However, the degree of project intensity varies depending on individual faculty members and the availability of external project partners.

Although the program prioritizes project-based learning, classical lecture formats have not disappeared. They are retained primarily for theoretical input and foundational knowledge. Assessment formats include portfolios, project reports, presentations, prototype development, self reflection and annotated code documentation. Traditional written examinations are used selectively.

A particularly illustrative example of how project-based learning and AI integration materialize in practice is the project *Paletten aus Pixeln* (*Pallets made of pixels*) undertaken by a student team in collaboration with industry partners Google and BMW. In this three-week project, students developed a tool that uses artificial intelligence to generate realistic images of logistics assets—such as Europallets, forklifts, and transport boxes—based on user-specified configurations. These AI-generated images address a practical challenge in logistics planning, where assembling diverse real-world pictures of equipment in varying conditions (e.g., different levels of wear,

dirt, or orientations) can be time-consuming and resource-intensive; the students' tool automates this process, producing tailored images on demand. The project involved daily team coordination, frequent consultation with external partners, and substantive software development, including Python programming and iterative testing. Beyond technical deliverables, participants reported significant growth in teamwork, responsibility, and applied problem-solving—outcomes that align with the program's learning objectives and demonstrate how students transition from theoretical knowledge to real-world impact. This work was recognized both by partner organizations and regional innovation initiatives, underscoring the value of immersive, industry-engaged projects in the curriculum (Coburg University, 2025b).

Student perceptions of the *Information Systems 2.0* program further underscore its practical orientation and applied focus. According to *StudyCheck* – a platform where current and former students provide anonymous feedback on programs – the program receives an overall rating of 4.8 out of 5 stars ($n = 32$), indicating high student satisfaction. Reviewers consistently highlight the curriculum's hands-on projects, real-world problem solving, interdisciplinary teamwork, and supportive teaching staff as key strengths (Studycheck.de, 2026). These user-generated impressions align closely with the program's stated aims of preparing graduates for dynamic professional environments. While the high rating suggests broad approval, it should be interpreted cautiously, as online platforms often attract contributions from particularly engaged or satisfied students rather than providing a statistically representative sample.

Importantly, no formalized competence framework structures the curriculum yet. The operationalization of "future skills" depends largely on individual instructors. The constitutional principle of academic freedom limits the extent to which standardized project formats or assessment structures can be imposed across modules (Coburg University, 2025a). As a result, the program exhibits internal heterogeneity: while some modules fully embrace project-based and AI-supported formats, others retain more conventional teaching approaches. This variability reflects a structural tension between innovation ambitions and entrenched academic norms. In order to accommodate a structured curriculum, the module handbook is being evaluated and

further developed using the *NextSkills framework* (Ehlers, 2020), and a publication is currently in progress (Heim et al., 2026).

Artificial intelligence is integrated at multiple levels: through dedicated compulsory modules, the use of AI tools in classroom settings, and its application in independent project work. However, the depth of integration depends on faculty expertise and project feasibility.

Project collaborations span a broad spectrum: from global corporations such as Google (IT tech) to regional SMEs like Paul Rauschert Steinbach (technical ceramics) and Lauensteiner Confiserie (chocolate manufacturer), as well as micro-enterprises (Coburg University, 2025b). While this diversity reduces dependency on individual partners, it also results in varying project complexity and outcome quality. Some student projects produce limited tangible results, particularly in early semesters. Anecdotal observations suggest that project quality increases over the course of study, yet systematic longitudinal evaluation is not available.

The reliance on external partners introduces additional coordination demands and unpredictability into the curriculum. The program's interdisciplinary and transfer-oriented design significantly increases faculty workload. Teaching responsibilities extend beyond content delivery to include project coaching, stakeholder coordination, and applied research collaboration. Although these activities enhance practical relevance, they also reduce time available for research.

Overload discussions have emerged, particularly given the limited structural relief within existing deputation models. The program's organizational logic (iterative project cycles, flexible cooperation formats, and cross-disciplinary coordination) does not fully align with established university administrative routines. This misalignment generates additional bureaucratic effort and negotiation processes.

Thus, while the program embodies strategic agency and regional responsiveness, it simultaneously reveals institutional rigidity and resource constraints within the broader university framework.

5 Structural Tensions

The case of *Information Systems 2.0* reveals that entrepreneurial program innovation in higher education does not simply represent adaptive success. Rather, it exposes structural tensions that emerge when universities attempt to reconcile environmental responsiveness with institutional constraints. Three central conflict dimensions become visible.

Employability Orientation versus Theoretical Depth

A core ambition of the program is to enhance graduate employability through project-based learning, AI integration, and close industry collaboration. Nearly all modules incorporate applied components, and assessments emphasize practical outputs such as prototypes, project reports, and annotated code.

From a contingency perspective, this orientation reflects alignment with labor market demands and technological volatility. However, the strong emphasis on applied outcomes creates a structural tension regarding theoretical consolidation. Classical lecture formats and theory-driven examinations are reduced to a minimum and largely depend on individual instructors' priorities.

The absence of a formalized competence framework further amplifies this tension. While "future skills" are frequently invoked, their operationalization remains decentralized and instructor-dependent. This can result in variability in theoretical depth across modules. The principle of academic freedom reinforces this heterogeneity, limiting the possibility of enforcing a standardized balance between applied and theoretical components (Zagel et al., 2024).

Thus, the program's employability focus, while strategically rational, may risk uneven theoretical grounding and conceptual fragmentation. The tension is not accidental but structurally embedded in the program's design logic.

Agility versus Accreditation and Administrative Logic

The program aspires to operate with high agility: iterative project cycles, flexible cooperation with external partners, and rapid integration of emerging technologies such as AI tools. Such agility aligns with contingency theory's assumption that volatile environments require flexible internal structures (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

But universities are embedded in regulatory and administrative frameworks characterized by accreditation cycles, standardized module descriptions, and fixed workload calculations. The innovative governance logic of the program does not fully correspond to established administrative routines.

Project-based modules require ongoing adjustments depending on partner availability and technological developments. Yet accreditation documentation presupposes predefined learning outcomes and stable curricular structures. This misalignment generates additional coordination effort and bureaucratic negotiation. Faculty members report increased administrative workload, particularly when project-based formats deviate from conventional lecture-examination models.

Institutional theory helps explain this friction: while innovation enhances external legitimacy in terms of digital transformation discourse, internal legitimacy remains tied to standardized procedural conformity. The program thus operates within a dual legitimacy regime—externally rewarded for innovation, internally constrained by procedural stability.

Faculty Agency versus Institutional Capacity

The transformation toward project-based, AI-integrated learning significantly reshapes faculty roles. Instructors act not only as lecturers but as project coaches, industry liaisons, and facilitators of interdisciplinary collaboration. This expansion reflects the entrepreneurial university model, where faculty become central change agents (Zagel et al., 2024; Clark, 1998; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013).

However, this agency is bounded by institutional capacity. Project supervision, stakeholder coordination, and iterative curriculum adaptation require substantial time investment. Existing deputation models and workload regulations offer limited structural compensation for these additional responsibilities. As a result, overload discussions have emerged, particularly regarding the balance between teaching, transfer activities, and research obligations.

The intensified teaching and coordination demands reduce time available for research, potentially weakening long-term academic development. This creates a paradox: while the program strengthens regional engagement and applied innovation, it may inadvertently undermine research productivity if institutional incentives remain unchanged.

The case therefore illustrates that entrepreneurial reform often relies heavily on individual commitment. Without structural adjustments in incentive systems and administrative support, innovation risks depending on sustained personal overextension rather than institutionalized capacity.

6   Discussion

The case of *Information Systems 2.0* demonstrates that curricular innovation in higher education cannot be understood solely as adaptive alignment with digital transformation pressures. Rather, it reveals the coexistence of competing institutional logics that must be actively negotiated at program level (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

From a contingency perspective, the strong orientation toward project-based learning and AI integration represents a rational response to environmental volatility and regional labor market expectations (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Martin & Xie, 2022). The program increases external relevance and strengthens regional engagement (Rebhan, 2024; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). However, the findings suggest that adaptive alignment produces internal differentiation and coordination costs. Agility

requires continuous negotiation between instructors, administrators, and external partners (McDowell, 2020; Aliabadi et al., 2023).

Institutional theory helps explain why innovation does not fully translate into structural transformation. While the program signals modernity and responsiveness externally, it remains embedded in accreditation regimes, administrative routines, and disciplinary traditions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The persistence of lecture-based formats and the variability of theoretical depth across modules reflect this institutional embedding. Innovation therefore occurs within, rather than outside of, existing regulatory frameworks.

The case also highlights the central role of faculty as mediators between environmental expectations and institutional constraints (Clark, 1998; Siegel & Leih, 2018). Faculty members act as designers, coordinators, and boundary spanners. Yet the intensified demands associated with project supervision and transfer activities expose limits of institutional capacity (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; McDowell, 2020). Without adjustments in workload models and incentive structures, entrepreneurial reform risks depending on sustained individual commitment rather than structural support.

The discussion illustrates that digital and project-oriented reforms not only create new learning formats but also pose governance challenges (Aliabadi et al., 2023; Zagel et al., 2024). Program innovations enhance external legitimacy, yet can simultaneously strain internal organizational coherence. The interplay of contingency-driven adaptation pressures, institutional constraints, and strategic faculty engagement demonstrates that curriculum reform is a complex balancing act between flexibility, academic autonomy, and institutional legitimacy (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Dee & Leišytė, 2016).

Taken together, the findings suggest that digital and project-oriented reform initiatives generate not only new learning formats but also governance challenges. Program-level innovation may increase external legitimacy while simultaneously straining internal organizational coherence.

7 Implications for Higher Education Development

The case of *Information Systems 2.0* provides several insights relevant for higher education institutions seeking to introduce project-based and digitally integrated curricula. These insights focus less on replicating a model and more on understanding the conditions under which program-level innovation can be effectively implemented.

Governance and Organizational Capacity

The program demonstrates that curriculum innovation requires alignment between program ambitions and institutional structures. Decentralized decision-making and flexible project coordination are effective at the module level but introduce additional administrative burdens. Institutions aiming to implement similar initiatives should consider:

- Adjusting workload models to account for increased project supervision and coordination efforts (Clark, 1998; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013).
- Providing administrative support for non-standard course formats, including project-based assessments and industry collaboration (Aliabadi et al., 2023).
- Ensuring alignment with accreditation requirements without restricting pedagogical flexibility (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

These measures help to balance agility and institutional coherence, mitigating risks associated with faculty overload or inconsistent program delivery.

Faculty Roles and Professional Development

Innovation in teaching and curriculum design expands faculty responsibilities beyond traditional instruction. Faculty act as project coaches, interdisciplinary collaborators, and mediators with external stakeholders. To support these roles, institutions should:

- Provide continuous professional development in digital pedagogy, project supervision, and emerging technologies such as AI (Martin & Xie, 2022; Aliabadi et al., 2023).
- Recognize and reward non-traditional academic contributions, including applied research, student coaching, and curriculum co-creation (Siegel & Leih, 2018).
- Foster interdisciplinary teaching teams to distribute workload and enhance capacity for project supervision (McDowell, 2020).

These measures strengthen internal capability and reduce dependency on individual faculty initiative.

Curriculum Design and Student Learning

The case highlights the potential and limitations of project-based, AI-integrated curricula. Institutions should be aware that:

- High variability in project scope, complexity, and quality may emerge, especially with students entering directly from secondary education.
- Absence of formalized competence frameworks can lead to heterogeneous learning outcomes.
- Continuous feedback loops, structured reflection, and targeted guidance are essential to maintain coherence across modules and to ensure that theoretical foundations are not neglected.

By acknowledging these conditions, higher education institutions can design programs that are both innovative and academically rigorous.

Regional Engagement and Institutional Strategy

Programs embedded in regional innovation ecosystems benefit from enhanced relevance and external legitimacy (Rebhan, 2024; Marginson & Considine, 2000). However, engagement with multiple partners requires careful coordination. Institutions should:

- Map potential industry partners and define roles and expectations clearly.
- Monitor outcomes to ensure that collaborations contribute meaningfully to student learning and regional development.
- Balance regional specialization with exposure to broader industry practices to maintain professional relevance.

Strategic integration with regional stakeholders provides both practical learning opportunities and institutional visibility, but requires ongoing management to avoid overreliance on specific partners or projects.

8   Conclusion

The case of *Information Systems 2.0* at *Coburg University* illustrates that innovation in higher education curricula is inherently a process of negotiation between ambition, institutional structures, and external demands. The program's emphasis on project-based learning, AI integration, and regional engagement demonstrates how higher education institutions can enhance relevance and responsiveness (Aliabadi et al., 2023; Rebhan, 2024; Marginson & Considine, 2000).

At the same time, the findings reveal persistent structural tensions:

1. *Employability versus theoretical depth* – project-oriented, applied learning increases student readiness for the labor market but creates variability in theoretical grounding.
2. *Agility versus administrative constraints* – iterative course design and flexible collaboration require additional coordination within rigid accreditation and workload frameworks.
3. *Faculty agency versus institutional capacity* – expanded roles and responsibilities demand professional development and workload adjustment to prevent overextension.

These tensions highlight that curricular innovation is not solely a matter of design but depends critically on governance structures, institutional support, and faculty capacity. Successful implementation requires explicit attention to workload management, interdisciplinary collaboration, structured feedback mechanisms, and alignment with regulatory frameworks.

Overall, the case suggests that small- to medium-sized institutions can serve as laboratories for educational innovation when they strategically leverage regional engagement, project-based pedagogy, and emerging technologies. The lessons drawn from this program are not prescriptions for replication, but rather reflections on the conditions, trade-offs, and management practices that enable higher education institutions to navigate the complexities of curriculum reform in a rapidly evolving environment. It demonstrates that even smaller, regionally located HEIs can serve as laboratories of innovation, provided they cultivate a culture of agility, inclusivity, and strategic alignment – in other words, adapting to a world full of disruption.

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