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New Models of the University – Innovative Structures, Adaptive Responses, and Strategic Behavior

1   Introduction

Universities are increasingly confronted with the paradox of stability and change. While their missions of research, teaching, and societal engagement remain constant, the conditions under which these missions are pursued have changed profoundly. Global competition, digital transformation, and expectations for social impact compel higher education institutions (HEIs) to rethink their organizational models and governance structures (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Leišytė, Dee & van der Meulen, 2023). The Humboldtian legacy of autonomy and academic self-governance is challenged by pressures for efficiency, accountability, and innovation.

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The *Call for Papers* for this special issue, *New Models of the University: Innovative Structures, Adaptive Responses, and Strategic Behavior*, highlighted these tensions by pointing to a key paradox in contemporary higher education: universities must remain faithful to their core academic missions while simultaneously adapting to external demands that often conflict with those missions. Concepts such as *mission overload* and *mission drift* capture the risk that universities, in striving to be globally competitive and locally relevant, become overextended and lose strategic focus.

As the call emphasized, universities today operate as both social institutions—embedded in cultural and political contexts—and strategic organizations that pursue specific goals and navigate complex stakeholder landscapes. This dual nature implies that neither deterministic models of structural constraint nor voluntaristic notions of managerial freedom suffice to explain change. This tension reflects what Astley and Van de Ven (1983) highlighted as the paradox of environmental determinism and managerial agency. This perspective brings us back to old institutionalism theory, which precisely focuses on the organization as a meso-level social setting where external pressures and internal actions intersect (Clark, 1983; Fumasoli, Barbato & Turri, 2019). The papers in this issue explore this paradox empirically and theoretically. They investigate how universities balance autonomy and accountability, innovation and continuity, competition and cooperation. Drawing on organizational and institutional theory, they illuminate how HEIs act as adaptive, learning systems (Sporn, 2018; Rose, Dee & Leišytė, 2020) embedded in broader policy environments that shape but do not determine their trajectories.

In recent years, digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) have emerged as transformative forces, accelerating what Gibbons et al. (1994) called the shift toward "Mode 2" knowledge production—context-driven, problem-focused, and socially distributed. Universities are responding to these pressures not only by adopting new technologies but by developing new governance capacities: anticipatory foresight, cross-sector collaboration, and networked forms of organization (Maassen & Olsen, 2007).

Against this backdrop, the contributions in this special issue collectively address a central question: How are universities reconfiguring their organizational architecture, governance systems, and strategic behaviors to navigate complex, multi-level change?

2 Genesis of the Special Issue

The idea for this issue emerged from ongoing scholarly debates and empirical observations of institutional transformation in European and international higher education. The editors invited contributions that would combine analytical depth with empirical rigor, aiming to bridge perspectives from sociology of organizations, higher education research, and management studies.

The Call for Papers proposed several analytical dimensions to guide contributions: (1) funding and resource dependence; (2) digitalization and technological innovation; (3) diversity, inclusion, and internationalization; (4) autonomy and governance; (5) academic freedom and legitimacy; and (6) societal relevance and impact. These themes reflect both long-term trajectories in higher education and new systemic pressures resulting from global crises, AI diffusion, and sustainability imperatives.

The call also invited authors to employ organizational and institutional lenses, particularly resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), institutional isomorphism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). These frameworks recognize universities as dynamic actors that pursue strategic positioning while operating within regulatory and cultural constraints.

Out of the numerous submissions, thirteen contributions were selected after peer review, reflecting diverse methodologies—qualitative case studies, ethnography, document analysis, and literature reviews—and spanning contexts from Europe to North America and the Middle East. Collectively, they show that organizational change in universities is rarely linear; it unfolds through negotiation, adaptation, and experimentation across multiple levels.

For clarity and coherence, the papers are grouped into four thematic clusters. The guest editors used generative AI to assist in the initial identification of thematic clusters. Specifically, we provided the abstracts of all accepted articles to ChatGPT 5o, version 7 August 2025. The AI was prompted to identify and group the primary recurring themes against the backdrop of the Special Issue Call for Papers. The editors then critically reviewed, validated, refined, and merged these AI-generated suggestions to produce the final thematic clusters presented in this introduction. The final intellectual responsibility for the clusters rests entirely with the editors and they include:

1. Structural and Strategic Innovation – examining emerging governance models and institutional experiments;

2. Adaptive Governance and Crisis Management – addressing resilience, conflict, and technological disruption;

3. Collaborative and Anticipatory Development – exploring cooperation, networks, and AI governance; and

4. Broader Reform and Sustainability Perspectives – discussing reform discourses, climate adaptation, and quality assurance.

3 Overview of Contributions

3.1 Structural and Strategic Innovation

The first cluster examines how universities experiment with organizational structures, leadership models, and strategic tools to manage innovation and maintain academic integrity under conditions of change. These studies focus on the institutional and managerial dimensions of transformation, highlighting both intended and unintended consequences.

Lorenz Mrohs' contribution (*Projects as Agile Innovation Spaces?)* analyzes, on the basis of 20 qualitative interviews with coordinators of digitalization projects in higher education, how innovation-related projects influence structural change within universities. The results show that both intended effects and unintended challenges shape the institutionalization of innovation. Despite these tensions, projects function as agile structures and can serve as central instruments for steering university development and governance.

Lautaro Vilches (*The Rise of the Centre of Excellence: Continuities, Transformations, and Tensions in Governing a New University Model*) analyses the Centers of Excellence in Germany as a new university business model. Unlike the traditional Humboldtian model based on professorial chairs, such Centers are organized as quasi-departments with governance structures inspired by New Public Management. Drawing on interviews with members of three Centers of Excellence in the Social Sciences and Humanities, the paper conducts a micro-level analysis of the continuities, transformations, and tensions in traditional academic collegial governance. The findings suggest that while professors formally retain authority, the model introduces significant changes, such as the introduction of a powerful leader and managerial ethos. Vilches concludes that these competing managerial and collegial values create significant tensions, which overstretch the Humboldtian model rather than forming a stable co-existence.

The study by Jill Swisher, Lori Doyle (*Always reforming: Exploring agile methods for innovating faculty evaluation structures*) aims to explore faculty perceptions of agile methodologies in teaching and evaluation structures within Christian higher education institutions in the U.S. The pilot study reveals that while faculty are open to agile principles, they face challenges integrating them into existing evaluation systems. The paper argues that the theological mission of these institutions offers a unique case study in how Christian higher education institutions balance strategic adaptation with their traditional mission.

The paper by Alexandra Hashem-Wangler and Annika Maschwitz (*There Is Some Sort of New Dynamics: Examining the Impact of European University Alliances*)

looks at the impact of the European University Initiative (EUI) focusing on a recently established European University Alliance, conceptualized as a meta-organization, i.e. an organization whose members are other organizations. Using Stockmann's innovation-diffusion model and qualitative group interviews with academic staff from the nine member universities, the study examines the implementation process of the alliance. The analysis reveals that transformation depends on three key factors: the organizational characteristics enabling trust-building to overcome cross-institutional, national, systemic and cultural differences; the available commitment to foster transformational change towards an international mindset and to secure leadership buy-in; and the coordination needed to enhance transparency and clear communication across all partners. The authors conclude that while new institutional dynamics are detected, the alliance is still in an early diffusion stage, facing significant challenges in engaging the broader faculty and student body.

Anja Westphal's contribution (*Digitalization of HR Management Processes at Universities – A Systematic Literature Review*) focuses on the digitalization of internal university processes in human resource management at German higher education institutions, based on a systematic literature review. The study examines current publications on digitalization in higher education and finds that the majority of existing research concentrates on the digitalization of teaching, future skills, and the technologies required for transforming educational practices. The paper highlights the need for further research into how administrative and HR digitalization can be strategically aligned with institutional development.

Emanuela Dal Zotto, Flavio Ceravolo, and Michele Rostan (*Biodiversity and the Future of Science: The Case of the Italian National Biodiversity Future Center*) analyze the Italian National Biodiversity Future Centre (NBFC), a novel research structure established with extraordinary funding from Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Focusing on the Centre's multi-level governance, the paper utilizes an ethnographic case study in which the authors were participant-observers. The analysis highlights significant vulnerabilities: severe bureaucratization that exacerbates the administrative burdens of involved university departments; lack of dedicated administrative staff to support the new center; and persistent challenges in achieving

deeper interdisciplinarity. The study also finds that societal and industry engagement remains underdeveloped due to mismatches between academic and business working patterns. The authors conclude that the long-term sustainability of the NBFC is at risk, warning that universities might face political pressure to stabilize the positions of hundreds of researchers hired on temporary positions without being provided the necessary financial means.

Collectively, the six contributions in this cluster reveal that strategic and structural innovation in universities can be paradoxical. Attempts to modernize governance often reproduce traditional hierarchies, while agility initiatives can generate both empowerment and fragmentation. Nevertheless, these studies affirm that innovation emerges not in spite of institutional complexity but through navigating it – a theme that resonates throughout this special issue.

3.2 Adaptive Governance and Crisis Management

The second cluster turns to resilience and adaptation. It asks how universities sustain continuity and legitimacy amid crisis, disruption, and technological turbulence. Both papers here illustrate how institutions learn and adapt under pressure while navigating between compliance and autonomy.

The contribution by Verena Régent, Roi Avila, Limor Aharonson-Daniel, Dorit Alt, Svitlana Tarasenko, and Anna Vorontsova (*Continuity and Accessibility of Higher Education in Armed Conflict*) examines the adaptation strategies of higher education institutions for maintaining operations and academic activity amid armed conflict, using three examples from different countries (Ukraine, Israel, and Syria). The findings reveal that crises function not only as threats but also as catalysts for innovation. Through necessity, universities develop new forms of decentralized management, digital teaching infrastructures, and transnational cooperation that outlast the crisis context.

Veronika Graceva, Paula Goerke, and Andreas Breiter (*HEIs Under Pressure: AI Policies and Isomorphic Processes in the Higher Education System*) analyze 29 German university AI strategies. Using institutional isomorphism theory, they identify coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms that drive convergence. AI policies serve not only as governance tools but also as symbolic artifacts legitimizing universities as "digitally competent" actors. The study highlights the ambivalence of such policies: while they promote innovation rhetoric, they often replicate templates from other institutions or national ministries. The authors warn that policy alignment without reflexivity risks a shallow form of modernization. Effective AI governance, they argue, requires moving from imitation to anticipatory, participatory strategy development.

Together, these studies show that adaptive governance depends on institutional learning. Whether through war or technological disruption, universities develop new repertoires of response that can either institutionalize or dissipate once the immediate threat subsides.

3.3   Collaborative and Anticipatory Development

The third cluster explores cooperation, foresight, and technological complementarity. It highlights how universities build alliances and anticipate futures shaped by artificial intelligence.

Simone Roth, Nicolas De Keyser, Ines Müller-Vogt, and Alexander Arenas Canon (*Designing Collaboration: Building Sustainable Communities in University Alliance CHARM-EU*) investigate the strategic development and implementation of internal networking formats within CHARM-EU, a transnational European University alliance, aiming to foster sustainable community building across diverse institutional contexts. Utilizing theories of Communities of Practice and Networked Improvement Communities, the study co-created and tested Guiding Principles through pilot events involving over 90 participants, with evaluation data informing iterative improvements. Findings highlight key success factors of implementation, such as, clarity in objectives and inclusive participation.

In their study (*Partners or Tools? – Anticipatory Governance for Human-AI Complementarity in Higher Education*), Daniel Autenrieth and Jan-René Schluchter investigate anticipatory governance as a framework for addressing the transformative effects of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. It highlights the potential for universities to shift from reactive governance to transformative reimagination through participatory foresight and collaborative responsible human-AI interactions. Building on organizational theory and higher education governance research, the paper offers a framework combining structural governance challenges, the emergence of "shadow AI," and the concept of complementary intelligence, which positions universities as active shapers of their futures in an evolving technological landscape.

Together, these two contributions conceptualize the university as both collaborative and innovative institutions: alliances build collective capacity, while anticipatory governance prepares them for uncertain futures.

3.4   Broader Reform and Sustainability Perspectives

The final cluster broadens the lens to encompass reform, sustainability, and quality development. These papers show that governance innovation must ultimately serve societal responsibility and enhance institutional legitimacy.

Regina Ahlbrecht, Jana Kirchner, Wanja Kröger, Maya Mankievicz, and Benjamin Zinger (*Jointly Effective: Network Impulses for Tomorrow's Universities*) address reform discourses in higher education characterized as social arenas in which individuals experience and actively shape change. Drawing on experiences from the *Lehre^{n}network*, they show how the shaping of the university's future can be approached from the perspective of academic actors, assigning a decisive role to new forms of multi-perspective collaboration and co-creation.

Julia Uhde and her colleague's contribution (*Climate-Adapted Universities: Perspectives from Three Campuses*) describes universities as increasingly confronted with climate-related risks. At the same time, there is still little empirical research into

the subjective needs of university members, making such inquiries particularly valuable. Her online survey at three German universities indicates that university members perceive current climate adaptation efforts as insufficient. The findings also reveal priority areas for action in developing institutional climate adaptation strategies (e.g. improvement of infrastructure, home office regulations, hybrid teaching formats).

Christopher Banditt, Juliane Wawrzynek, Johannes Waldenburger, and Margit Reimann (*Between Control and Development? Perceptions of Study Programme Accreditation*) study program accreditation as a potential driver of institutional development. Using a curriculum? case study, they examine stakeholder satisfaction and perceptions of control and developmental functions within an internal accreditation process at a university in Germany? Their findings show that, in this case, stakeholders' perceptions are more positive than commonly assumed, suggesting that accreditation processes can foster constructive dialogue and organizational learning.

These studies converge on the insight that sustainable reform requires participation, reflexivity, and long-term commitment. Whether addressing academic networks, climate change, or quality assurance, universities act as social systems negotiating between regulation and creativity.

4   Synthesis and Outlook

Bringing the four clusters together, a consistent picture emerges of the contemporary university as an adaptive, strategically reflexive organization. Across all contributions, several interrelated themes stand out.

External events—political conflicts, technological disruptions, or funding reforms— serve as catalysts for organizational? learning. The papers in this issue show that crises make institutional routines visible and malleable. Adaptation involves improvisation but can evolve into durable governance reforms when lessons are institutionalized.

Collaboration and anticipation are becoming defining competencies of university institutional capacity. As authors in this issue illustrate, alliances and AI governance frameworks exemplify new forms of "open strategizing" that extend beyond organizational boundaries. Universities act simultaneously as knowledge producers and as co-designers of societal futures.

Sustainability and legitimacy represent a key element of university reform. The contributions in this issue demonstrate that institutional credibility now depends on the capacity to address grand societal challenges while maintaining internal quality and participation. The notion of the university as a "public good" (Marginson, 2011) is being redefined through expectations of environmental responsibility, social inclusion, and transparency.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce the need for multi-level frameworks of analysis that bridge structural and agentic perspectives (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983). The *Call for Papers* rightly suggested that organizational theory, institutionalism, and strategic management should not be seen as competing paradigms but as complementary lenses. Together, they illuminate how universities operate in fields characterized by both dependence and autonomy.

In sum, this issue contributes to a growing body of scholarship portraying universities as complex adaptive systems (Maassen & Olsen, 2007). Change is not a sequence of discrete reforms but a continuous process of sense-making, negotiation, and adaptation. Strategic behavior in higher education is less about planning than about navigating uncertainty, building trust, and cultivating foresight.

Looking forward, three implications stand out:

1. Universities must develop anticipatory capacity—institutional mechanisms for foresight, scenario analysis, and ethical deliberation on technology and sustainability.

2. Governance should embrace participatory structures that bridge administrative, academic, and societal stakeholders.

3. Research should further examine the temporal dimension of change—how short-term projects evolve into long-term institutional trajectories.

As higher education systems confront AI integration, climate transition, and global inequality, universities will continue to balance determinism and agency, autonomy and interdependence. These societal demands are not merely external pressures; they are actively mediated, interpreted, and contested within the university as a distinct meso-level social setting. The contributions in this issue provide valuable empirical and conceptual insights for understanding these dynamics.

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