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MODERN GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: MODELS, TRENDS, AND MANAGERIAL CHALLENGES

Abstract

The governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become one of the central concerns of contemporary educational policy, driven by globalisation, demographic shifts, digital transformation, and growing demands for institutional accountability and quality assurance. This article offers a comprehensive analysis of theoretical foundations, contemporary governance challenges, and current European trends shaping the management of modern universities, with particular attention to the comparative experience of Ukraine, Poland, and the European Union in the period 2020–2025. Drawing on conceptual frameworks including shared governance, managerial governance, network governance, and evidence-based decision-making, the article examines how HEIs navigate competing pressures between academic autonomy and public accountability. The comparative empirical analysis reveals significant divergences in institutional autonomy, quality assurance maturity, leadership professionalisation, and lifelong learning infrastructure. Ukraine’s higher education system, operating under the compounded pressures of pandemic disruption and armed conflict, demonstrates both acute structural vulnerabilities – including enrolment instability, declining international student numbers, and low graduate employability – and remarkable adaptive capacities, exemplified by the rapid growth of adult learners and the internationally recognised Diia.Education digital platform. Poland’s successful post-decline recovery within EHEA frameworks offers a constructive governance reference point. The article concludes that convergence with European governance standards requires Ukraine to pursue institutional rationalisation, autonomy expansion, leadership development, and the strategic integration of lifelong learning, while its crisis-driven innovations offer transferable insights for the broader European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: higher education governance, institutional autonomy, quality assurance, lifelong learning, digital transformation, European Higher Education Area.

Introduction. The governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has undergone profound transformation over the past decades, driven by globalization, demographic shifts, technological progress, and the increasing demand for accountability and educational quality. In contemporary conditions, universities are expected not only to provide high-quality teaching and research but also to operate as flexible, strategically oriented organizations capable of responding to rapid societal and economic changes. As a result, the study of effective models and approaches to university governance has become increasingly relevant across Europe and beyond.

Modern HEIs operate in complex and dynamic environments shaped by digitalisation, labour market restructuring, international competition for students and staff, and the growing emphasis on competence-based learning. These developments challenge traditional hierarchical management systems and call for new governance paradigms centred on autonomy, transparency, stakeholder engagement, and data-driven decision-making.¹

European higher education systems, particularly within the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), offer a wide array of innovative management practices, including enhanced institutional autonomy, diversified quality assurance mechanisms, and expanded international partnerships. The integration of Ukrainian higher education into the European academic space further strengthens the demand for comparative and analytical studies of governance models.

Against this backdrop, the present article offers a comprehensive review of contemporary theoretical approaches and practical models of higher education governance, with particular attention to current European trends influencing university development. Through analysing conceptual frameworks and policy directions, the article aims to identify key patterns, challenges, and opportunities that shape the governance of modern HEIs.

This study aims to analyse contemporary governance models and managerial challenges in European higher education institutions, and to identify key patterns, gaps, and opportunities relevant to the Ukrainian higher education context. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks underpin modern governance practices in higher education institutions? (2) What are the primary managerial challenges facing contemporary universities in the context of digitalization, demographic change, and quality assurance demands? (3) How do governance practices in Poland and the broader European Union compare with those of Ukrainian higher education, and what strategic pathways exist for Ukraine's further convergence within the European Higher Education Area?

Methodology. This study employs a qualitative desk-based research design combined with comparative empirical analysis, structured around two complementary phases.

The first phase involved a systematic review of academic literature and policy documents to identify theoretical frameworks underpinning contemporary higher education governance. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, European University Association (EUA) reports, EHEA policy documents, and national regulatory frameworks, with a focus on publications from 2010 to 2024.

The second phase comprised a comparative analysis of higher education governance in Ukraine, Poland, and the broader European Union over the period 2020–2025. The selection of Poland as the primary national reference system is justified by four interconnected criteria. First, from a historical perspective, both Poland and Ukraine share a common institutional heritage rooted in the Soviet higher education model, characterized by centralized state governance, standardized curricula, and limited institutional autonomy – a shared structural origin that provides a methodologically coherent baseline for assessing divergent reform trajectories. Second, from an institutional perspective, Poland represents one of the most relevant and well-documented cases of successful post-Soviet higher education transformation within the EHEA, having substantially expanded institutional autonomy, modernized its quality assurance system through the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA), and diversified its funding mechanisms following the landmark Law on Higher Education and Science (2018). Third, from a geographic and demographic perspective, Poland and Ukraine are neighbouring countries with strong academic ties, significant student mobility flows, and comparable socio-demographic pressures, including

¹ Sami Hussein and Mohammad Zadeh, "Governance Models and Decision-Making Structures in Higher Education," *Applied Science, Engineering and Management Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (2024): 21–8, [https://doi.org/10.69889/asemb.v1i1\(Oct-Dec\).18](https://doi.org/10.69889/asemb.v1i1(Oct-Dec).18).

demographic decline and emigration-driven enrolment contraction. Fourth, Poland's recovery from a sustained enrolment decline between 2015 and 2020 offers a directly applicable governance reference point for Ukraine, which faces structurally similar challenges under considerably more acute conditions.

The governance dimensions selected for comparative analysis – institutional autonomy, quality assurance, strategic leadership, financing, and internationalization – reflect core priorities in EHEA policy discourse and correspond directly to the principal reform areas identified in Ukrainian higher education legislation. Quantitative indicators presented in Table 3 are drawn from Eurostat, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, and the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS). Where absolute values are cited, the analysis explicitly acknowledges contextual differences in population size and institutional scale to ensure interpretive validity.

Theoretical Foundations of Higher Education Governance. The governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has evolved significantly over the past half-century, reflecting broader transformations in public administration, organizational theory, and global educational policy. Theoretical approaches to university governance today combine classical management concepts with contemporary frameworks that emphasize autonomy, quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, and institutional accountability. This section provides an overview of key conceptual models that underpin modern governance practices in higher education.

Historically, the collegial model, characterized by shared decision-making, academic self-rule, and a strong faculty role in institutional leadership, shaped university governance. While this model remains foundational for academic culture, it has gradually integrated elements of alternative governance paradigms in response to increasing complexity and external pressures. From the late twentieth century onward, several new models emerged:

- Bureaucratic-administrative governance, rooted in Weberian organizational theory, emphasizes hierarchical structures, formal procedures, and state control over higher education systems.
- New Public Management (NPM) introduced market-oriented logic, managerial accountability, efficiency, and performance indicators.
- Corporate governance models strengthened executive leadership, strategic planning, and managerial autonomy, positioning universities as competitive actors in a global education market.
- This evolution reflects a gradual shift from traditional academic self-governance toward hybrid forms combining collegial and managerial components.

Modern governance frameworks in higher education integrate multiple theoretical perspectives. Among the most influential are shared governance, managerial governance, network governance, and evidence-based governance supported by digitalization.

To deepen the theoretical analysis, it is useful to systematize the principal governance models that have shaped the evolution of higher education systems over the past decades. While traditional frameworks continue to influence institutional cultures, modern universities increasingly operate within hybrid governance arrangements that combine elements of collegiality,² managerialism, network collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the core characteristics, strengths, and limitations of classical governance models and contemporary governance approaches, respectively.

These models demonstrate the gradual transition from traditional academic self-rule toward governance systems that balance autonomy, accountability, and inter-institutional cooperation. In addition to classical models, HEIs increasingly rely on new governance approaches shaped by globalization, digitalization, and competence-based education. Table 2 summarises the key frameworks.

These contemporary approaches illustrate the shift toward dynamic, accountable, and externally connected governance structures. Together, the models and approaches presented in Tables 1 and 2 provide a structured conceptual basis for analysing how universities navigate increasingly complex environments. This study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis relies primarily on secondary data sources and policy documents, which may not fully capture informal governance practices or institution-level variations.

² Julie Rowlands, *Academic Governance in the Contemporary University* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2688-1_6.

Table 1

Classical Governance Models in Higher Education Institutions

Governance Model	Core Characteristics	Advantages	Limitations / Risks
Collegial Model	Shared decision-making; authority held by academic staff; consensus-oriented; strong academic self-governance	Protects academic freedom; fosters trust and participation; high legitimacy within academic communities	Slow decision-making; limited strategic responsiveness; difficult to adapt to competitive environments
Bureaucratic-Administrative Model	Hierarchical management; formal rules and procedures; strong state control; emphasis on compliance ³	Clear responsibilities; predictability; alignment with national standards	Low flexibility; extensive formalisation; limited innovation
New Public Management (NPM)	Performance indicators; efficiency-driven reforms; market mechanisms; managerial accountability ⁴	Supports transparency; increases efficiency; strengthens strategic planning	Risk of over-bureaucratisation; metric-driven culture; weakened collegiality
Corporate Governance Model	Strong executive leadership; strategic orientation; diversified funding mechanisms	Enables quick decisions; improves financial sustainability; enhances competitiveness	Centralisation of power; possible erosion of academic autonomy
Network Governance Model	Interconnected cooperation with stakeholders; ecosystem approach; external partnerships ⁵	Promotes innovation; supports joint degrees and research networks	High coordination demands; dependency on external stakeholders

Table 2

Contemporary Governance Approaches in Modern Higher Education

Approach	Governance Logic	Key Instruments / Tools	Areas of Effectiveness
Shared Governance	Participatory decision-making; balanced authority among faculty, administration, and boards ⁶	Academic senates; committees; faculty councils	Academic quality; curriculum oversight; institutional legitimacy ⁷
Managerial Governance	Professionalised leadership; strategic planning; data-driven performance ⁸	KPIs; budgeting models; executive teams	Internationalization; organizational restructuring; efficiency
Network Governance	Collaboration with external stakeholders; multi-actor ecosystems	Partnership agreements; alliances; stakeholder councils	Innovation; dual education; research networks
Data-Driven Governance	Evidence-based decision-making via analytics and digital tools ⁹	Learning analytics; AI dashboards; labour market forecasting	Student success; predictive management; quality assurance

Moreover, the comparative scope focuses on selected European contexts and does not aim to provide exhaustive cross-national coverage. These limitations, however, do not undermine the analytical value of the study, but rather indicate directions for further empirical research.

³ J. Victor Baldrige, *Models of University Governance: Bureaucratic, Collegial, and Political* (Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, 1971), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED060825.pdf>.

⁴ António Magalhães and Amélia Veiga, "Models of Higher Education Governance in Europe: From 'Organised Anarchy' to Business-Corporate Organisations," *International Journal of Film and Media Arts* 7, no. 3 (2022): 49–63, <https://doi.org/10.24140/ijfma.v7.n3.04>.

⁵ Silvia Gaftandzhieva et al., "Data-Driven Decision Making in Higher Education Institutions: State-of-Play," *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications* 14, no. 6 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2023.0140642>.

⁶ Kashif Raza, Pamela Roach, Lorian Hardcastle, et al., "A Systematic Review of the Conceptualization, Interpretation, and Implementation of Shared Governance in Post-Secondary Contexts," *Studies in Higher Education* 50, no. 8 (2025): 1591–609, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2388274>.

⁷ Jon McNaughtan, Esther A. Enright, and Nathan F. Harris, "'A Seat at the Table': A Conceptual Model to Frame Shared Governance," *Higher Education Policy* 38 (2025): 797–821, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-024-00370-3>.

⁸ Andrea H. Becker, Carlton Goode, Jennifer Rivers, et al., "Shared Governance and Systems Theory: A Mixed-Methods Study of Faculty Perceptions and Ideas," *Higher Education Politics & Economics* 9, no. 2 (2023): 22–47, <https://doi.org/10.32674/hepe.v9i2.5974>.

⁹ Bianca I. Chigbu and Siculo L. Makapela, "Data-Driven Leadership in Higher Education," *Sustainability* 17, no. 7 (2025): 3116, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17073116>.

Contemporary Challenges in Higher Education Governance. Higher education institutions (HEIs) operate today in rapidly changing environments shaped by demographic, technological, economic, and socio-cultural transformations. These shifts impose new demands on institutional governance and require strategic adaptability, long-term vision, and evidence-based decision-making. This section provides an analytical overview of the major challenges affecting governance processes in modern universities.

One of the most significant challenges facing European and Ukrainian HEIs is the long-term demographic decline. Decreasing birth rates have resulted in smaller cohorts of prospective students, leading to heightened competition among universities for enrolment. This trend compels institutions to reconsider recruitment strategies, strengthen their international presence, and diversify their educational offerings. Universities increasingly compete not only domestically but globally, striving to attract international students through English-language programmes, improved mobility opportunities, and strategic partnerships. As a result, governance systems must integrate marketing, branding, and internationalisation policies into institutional strategy. Effective leadership becomes essential for balancing academic mission with market-driven pressures.

The transition from traditional knowledge-based curricula to competence-oriented educational models represents a paradigm shift requiring substantial governance adjustments. Competence-based education emphasises learning outcomes, employability, and alignment with labour market needs. Implementing this approach necessitates systemic collaboration across all institutional units, including academic departments, quality assurance centres, and external stakeholders. Key governance challenges include designing competency frameworks for academic programmes; ensuring consistency between teaching methods and expected learning outcomes; establishing reliable assessment and validation mechanisms; and involving employers in curriculum planning and review processes.¹⁰ The competence paradigm requires universities to adopt more flexible organizational structures and to integrate continuous programme improvement into governance routines.¹¹

Digitalisation has become a transformative force in higher education, reshaping teaching, learning, and administrative processes. Modern universities rely heavily on digital ecosystems, including learning management systems, e-administration tools, and analytics platforms. The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) introduces additional opportunities and governance complexities. AI tools can enhance student performance analytics and personalised learning trajectories; administrative automation and process optimisation; quality assurance through data-driven evaluation; predictive analytics for decision-making and resource allocation. However, effective integration of AI requires governance frameworks that address digital competence development among staff and students, ethical standards and data protection regulations, investment in IT infrastructure, and organisational change management. The governance challenge involves balancing innovation with responsible leadership and institutional readiness.

Quality assurance is a central component of modern university governance. In Europe, quality systems are guided by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which promote transparency, stakeholder participation, and continuous improvement. It implies the institutionalisation of comprehensive internal quality assurance procedures; cyclical programme reviews; student feedback and satisfaction monitoring; the engagement of external evaluators and employers; and the transparent publication of quality results. Effective governance requires that quality assurance be integrated into strategic planning and become part of the organisational culture rather than an administrative formality.

Contemporary HEIs increasingly operate within collaborative networks, forming partnerships that expand academic opportunities and strengthen competitiveness. Governance frameworks must therefore support and coordinate diverse types of cooperation. Key partnership models can include joint educational programmes and dual degrees with international universities; dual education, combining academic

¹⁰ Roger Ward and Leandra Cate, "The Balance of Power: A Contemporary Framework for Enhancing Shared Governance in Higher Education," *New Directions for Higher Education* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.70018>.

¹¹ Maarja Beerkens, "An Evolution of Performance Data in Higher Education Governance," *Quality in Higher Education* 28, no. 1 (2021): 29–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2021.1951451>.

learning with workplace practice; Lifelong Learning (LLL) initiatives aimed at adult learners; European university alliances and cross-border research networks; and industry-university collaborations supporting curriculum development and graduate employability. These networked forms of cooperation contribute to the diversification of institutional missions and require adaptive governance mechanisms capable of managing multicultural, multi-stakeholder environments.

European Trends in Higher Education Governance. European higher education is undergoing a period of intensive transformation driven by globalisation, digitalisation, demographic pressures, and growing expectations for institutional accountability. Governance reforms across Europe aim to strengthen institutional autonomy, enhance quality, support innovation, and foster cross-border cooperation. This section provides an analytical overview of key European trends that shape governance practices in modern universities, integrating conceptual and managerial perspectives relevant to current research and practice.

Autonomy is widely recognised as a cornerstone of effective university governance in Europe. Since the Bologna Process and subsequent reforms, European countries have systematically expanded the autonomy of HEIs in four core areas: organizational autonomy (internal structures, governance bodies, decision-making procedures); financial autonomy (budgetary flexibility, ability to generate and manage revenue); staffing autonomy (hiring, promotion, remuneration policies); academic autonomy (programme design, curriculum content, assessment standards). Greater autonomy enables universities to respond more flexibly to global and regional challenges, while simultaneously increasing their responsibility for performance outcomes. European practice demonstrates that autonomy is most effective when coupled with transparent governance, strategic planning, and strong internal quality assurance systems.

Quality assurance remains a central priority across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), guided by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG).¹² European universities are shifting from externally compliance-driven evaluation toward continuous improvement models, which emphasize evidence-based decision-making, the involvement of students and employers, regular program reviews, transparent reporting of educational outcomes, and the integration of quality assurance into strategic management. This approach supports a culture of quality that permeates all levels of institutional governance. Within this trend, universities increasingly adopt digital quality monitoring systems, student analytics, and competency-based evaluation frameworks.¹³

European universities have moved toward more strategic and professionalised leadership models. Rectors and executive teams play a critical role in setting institutional vision, developing international partnerships, and managing organisational change.¹⁴ This requires, among other things, strong communication with academic communities, balancing managerial efficiency with collegial values, long-term planning based on data and scenario analysis, and fostering a supportive environment for innovation and digital transformation. Nowadays, governance models therefore emphasise hybrid leadership, which combines academic legitimacy, managerial competence, and the ability to engage diverse stakeholders.¹⁵

While European governance frameworks strongly emphasize institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and strategic leadership, their practical implementation remains uneven across national systems. Empirical evidence suggests that formal expansion of autonomy does not automatically translate into enhanced institutional capacity or improved educational outcomes. In several post-transition systems, including Ukraine, autonomy often coexists with persistent regulatory constraints, limited financial discretion, and underdeveloped managerial competences. This gap between formal governance principles and operational realities highlights the importance of context-sensitive reform design rather than direct policy transfer.

¹² ENQA, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* (Brussels: ENQA, 2015), <https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-ehea/>

¹³ Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education (C/2025/3006)*, EUR-Lex, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/3006/oj>.

¹⁴ AGB, *Models of Governance in Higher Education: AGB Principles* (Association of Governing Boards, 2025), <https://agb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/AGB-ModelsOfGovernance-July2025.pdf>.

¹⁵ E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, ESU, EURASHE), *The ESG in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* (EUA, 2020), https://www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/e4_statement_the_esg_in_the_changing_landscape_of_higher_education.pdf.

Internationalisation is one of the defining features of modern European higher education governance. Universities engage in a wide range of cooperative activities. Wide-ranging activities, such as joint degree programs and dual diplomas, or mobility and exchange programs under Erasmus+, and others, require robust governance mechanisms capable of coordinating curriculum alignment, quality assurance, credit transfer, and resource sharing. Internationalisation strengthens institutional competitiveness but also increases managerial complexity.¹⁶

European universities are increasingly adopting elements of entrepreneurial governance, in which knowledge transfer, innovation, and industry partnerships play a strategic role. Key instruments include applied research centres, dual education models, and lifelong learning programmes tailored for professionals. Such collaborations enhance financial sustainability and improve graduate employability, while requiring governance systems capable of managing intellectual property, project portfolios, and stakeholder relationships.

European governance models emphasize universities' holistic mission – education, research, and societal engagement. HEIs are expected to contribute to regional development, social innovation, and public policy through community partnerships, civic engagement programmes, open science initiatives, and applied research addressing societal needs. This expansion of institutional mission necessitates governance frameworks that coordinate academic priorities with broader societal expectations.

Comparative analysis. To ground the comparative governance analysis in empirical context, this section draws on key statistical trends across Ukraine, Poland, and the broader European Union between 2020 and 2025 – a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and, for Ukraine, the profound consequences of full-scale armed conflict.

The EU counted approximately 18.8 million tertiary education students in 2023, with 59% enrolled in bachelor's programmes and women comprising 54.8% of all graduates. Poland, despite a sustained enrolment decline between 2015 and 2020 (from 1.41 million to 1.20 million students), recorded a notable recovery, reaching 1.28 million students across 352 higher education institutions in the 2024/25 academic year. Ukraine presents a more complex picture – in 2025, 178,720 first-year students (bachelor's and master's) were enrolled in Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs). Of this number, more than 50% of applicants received state support: 64,873 people on the budget, and about 30,000 students received state grants. In total, including postgraduate studies and colleges, the number of new students exceeds 300 thousand. The data consistently point to a structural mismatch between institutional capacity and actual enrolment, with significantly more places available than applicants – a governance challenge requiring urgent network optimisation.

One of the most governance-relevant demographic shifts in Ukraine is the rapid growth of the 25+ student cohort. By late 2025, this group exceeded 200,000–230,000 individuals, representing over 20% of the total student population – a transformation driven by internal displacement, career disruption, and the need for professional retraining. This development mirrors European-level priorities articulated in the European Skills Agenda (2020), which set a target of 47% adult participation in learning by 2025. The EU reached 46.6% participation in 2022, though significant regional disparities persist: adult learning participation among unemployed individuals ranged from 47.4% in Sweden to just 3.3% in Hungary in 2024. Poland's adult education trajectory follows EU frameworks closely, with ongoing Erasmus+ engagement and vocational upskilling programs aligned with its national qualifications system.

Lifelong learning and digital innovation. Ukraine's response to wartime disruption has produced noteworthy innovations in non-formal and digital education with direct governance implications. The state platform Diia.Education emerged as the primary instrument for adult digital upskilling, achieving broad reach in basic digital literacy (93% of users) while advanced competencies remain more limited (38%). The platform received international recognition with the QS Reimagine Education Awards Gold Prize in 2025. These developments align with – and in certain respects anticipate – the EU's growing

¹⁶ Gary Rhoades, "Shared Governance, Higher Education Institutions," in *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (Springer, 2020), 2529–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9_554.

Table 3

Higher Education: Key Indicators – Ukraine, Poland, and the EU (2020–2025)

Dimension	EU (general)	Poland	Ukraine
Total students	~18.8 million (2023)	1.28 million (2024/25)	~1 million (est.); structural enrolment gap
Enrolment trend	Stable with demographic pressure	Recovery after 2015–2020 decline	Declining; wartime demographic disruption
Adult learners (25+)	46.6% participation (2022); target 47% by 2025	Aligned with European Skills Agenda	200,000–230,000; over 20% of student body
Gender balance	54.8% female graduates	Consistent with EU trend	Female majority maintained
Lifelong learning	European Skills Agenda; micro-credentials; Individual Learning Accounts	Vocational upskilling; Eurydice-aligned reform	Diia.Education platform (QS Award 2025); IDP retraining programmes
Graduate employability	Competence-based curricula; dual education	Labour market-aligned programmes	~30% working in field of study
Institutional autonomy	Broad across all domains	High; consistent with EU frameworks	Partial; significant state constraints remain

emphasis on micro-credentials, short-cycle programs, and flexible learning pathways for working adults. Ukraine's experience thus offers transferable governance insights for European institutions seeking scalable models for rapid upskilling under conditions of structural uncertainty.¹⁷ A structured overview of key indicators across all three contexts is presented in Table 3.

The statistical and structural evidence presented above confirms that Ukraine's higher education system is navigating an exceptionally complex governance environment. The demographic contraction of the traditional student cohort, the rapid expansion of adult learners, and the collapse of international student numbers each demand different and, at times, competing institutional responses. At the same time, Ukraine's demonstrated capacity for rapid digital innovation – most visibly through Diia.Education – illustrates that crisis conditions can generate governance solutions with broader European relevance.

Poland's trajectory offers a particularly instructive reference point for Ukraine: having navigated its own demographic decline and undertaken substantial quality assurance reforms within the EHEA framework, Poland demonstrates that recovery and modernization are achievable within a relatively short timeframe when institutional autonomy, strategic leadership, and diversified funding are advanced in parallel.¹⁸

The pathway to convergence with European governance standards, therefore, requires Ukraine to pursue rationalization of its enrolment networks, deepen the integration of lifelong learning into formal higher education governance, and leverage its digital innovation capacity as a strategic asset rather than an emergency measure. These steps, taken together, would accelerate Ukraine's alignment with EHEA principles while contributing original governance models to the broader European academic community.

Conclusions

The governance of higher education institutions in the twenty-first century is defined by the need to balance competing demands: academic autonomy and public accountability, institutional tradition and strategic innovation, local context and global integration. This article has examined the theoretical foundations, contemporary challenges, and European trends shaping university governance, alongside an empirical comparative analysis of higher education developments in Ukraine, Poland, and the European Union between 2020 and 2025.

¹⁷ Liubov Zharova, "Access to Education as a Basis for Sustainable Development," *Scientific Bulletin of the Odessa National Economic University* 4, no. 267 (2019): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.32680/2409-9260-2019-4-267-36-58>.

¹⁸ Marta Jaworska and Davide Donina, "Higher Education Governance in Poland: Reform Pathway from the Communist Regime to Law 2.0," *Higher Education Policy* 37 (2022): 40–58, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-022-00293-x>.

Based on the comparative analysis presented above, we argue that governance reform in higher education cannot be reduced to structural reorganisation alone but must be understood as a long-term institutional learning process involving leadership capacity, stakeholder trust, and adaptive decision-making mechanisms. The theoretical review demonstrates that no single governance model adequately addresses the complexity of modern HEIs. Effective institutions increasingly operate within hybrid frameworks that combine collegial academic values, managerial efficiency, networked collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making. This hybridization is not a weakness but a necessary adaptation to environments characterized by demographic pressure, digital transformation, and shifting labour market expectations.

The comparative analysis reveals both meaningful convergence and persistent gaps. Poland's recovery from a decade-long enrolment decline – achieved through institutional rationalization, quality assurance reform, and alignment with European frameworks – offers a constructive reference point for Ukrainian higher education. The EU's progress toward the 47% adult participation target under the European Skills Agenda, and its emphasis on micro-credentials and flexible learning pathways, further illustrate the direction in which modern governance is moving. Ukraine, for its part, faces acute structural challenges: enrolment instability, a collapsing international student population, and low graduate employability rates signal the need for systemic reform rather than incremental adjustment.

Yet the evidence also points to Ukraine's distinctive contributions to governance. The rapid expansion of the adult learner cohort – exceeding 20% of the total student population by 2025 – reflects an institutional responsiveness that many stable European systems have struggled to achieve. The Diia.Education platform internationally recognized for its scalable approach to digital upskilling demonstrates that Ukraine is not merely a recipient of European governance models but an active contributor to their evolution. These innovations, born of necessity, carry transferable value for European institutions confronting their own structural uncertainties.

The priority agenda for Ukrainian higher education governance is consequently both clear and demanding. It encompasses the rationalization of the institutional network, the expansion of genuine financial and organizational autonomy, the systematic professionalization of university leadership, the deepening of quality assurance culture beyond formal compliance, and the strategic repositioning of lifelong learning as a core – rather than peripheral – institutional function. Progress on these fronts, supported by continued integration into EHEA frameworks and sustained international partnerships, would accelerate convergence with European standards while preserving Ukraine's adaptive capacity, its most distinctive governance asset.

Ultimately, the governance of higher education is not a technical problem with a fixed solution. It is an ongoing institutional practice requiring strategic vision, stakeholder trust, and the willingness to learn from data, from partners, and from experience. Ukraine's higher education system, tested by extraordinary circumstances, has demonstrated all three. The task ahead is to channel that capacity into sustainable institutional frameworks that serve students, society, and the broader European academic community.

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СУЧАСНЕ УПРАВЛІННЯ ЗАКЛАДАМИ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: МОДЕЛІ, ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ ТА УПРАВЛІНСЬКІ ВИКЛИКИ

Глобалізація, демографічні зміни, цифрова трансформація та зростання вимог до інституційної підзвітності й забезпечення якості зумовлюють потребу в нових підходах до сучасної освітньої політики, зокрема управління закладами вищої освіти (ЗВО). У статті представлено комплексний аналіз теоретичних засад, сучасних управлінських викликів та актуальних європейських тенденцій, що визначають менеджмент сучасних університетів, з особливою увагою до порівняльного досвіду України, Польщі та Європейського Союзу в період 2020–2025 років. На основі концептуальних моделей — колегіального, менеджерського та мережевого врядування, а також ухвалення рішень на підставі доказів — досліджено, як ЗВО долають суперечності між академічною автономією та суспільною підзвітністю. Порівняльний емпіричний аналіз виявив суттєві відмінності в рівнях інституційної автономії, зрілості систем забезпечення якості, професіоналізації керівництва та розвитку інфраструктури навчання впродовж життя. Система вищої освіти України в період пандемії COVID-19 та в умовах збройного конфлікту, що досі триває, демонструє як гострі структурні вразливості, як-от нестабільність вступної кампанії, зменшення кількості іноземних студентів, низький рівень працевлаштування за фахом, так і значний адаптивний потенціал, втілений у стрімкому зростанні частки дорослих студентів та в міжнародно визнаній платформі «Дія.Освіта». Досвід Польщі в подоланні демографічного спаду в межах Європейського простору вищої освіти (ЄПВО) слугує конструктивним орієнтиром. Зроблено висновок, що зближення з європейськими стандартами врядування потребує раціоналізації мережі ЗВО України, розширення автономії, розвитку лідерського потенціалу та стратегічної інтеграції навчання впродовж життя, тоді як інновації, народжені в кризових умовах, є цінним досвідом для всього Європейського простору вищої освіти.

Ключові слова: управління освітою, інституційна автономія, забезпечення якості, навчання впродовж життя, цифрова трансформація, Європейський простір вищої освіти.

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