Balancing Acts: Navigating Leadership, Transparency, and Compliance in University Governance

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This paper examines how universities can improve the speed and quality of decision making while upholding shared governance and academic freedom. Using a theory-led analysis informed by practice and a DACH[2] focus, it contrasts rules versus principles, maps the transparency–bureaucracy paradox, and analyses compliance as a double-edged constraint and enabler. A supporting case (TU Delft) illustrates key conditions for effective participation: openness to dissent, transparent moderation, routinised feedback loops, and leadership commitment. Findings show that committee overload and compliance formalism erode engagement, whereas culturally embedded digital tools can amplify meaningful participation and align actors. The paper concludes that balancing principle-based governance with lean processes is essential. Implications include redesigning compliance to clarify discretion, streamlining overlapping bodies, and adopting incremental reforms to build legitimacy and agility.

Keywords: university governance, shared governance, academic leadership, compliance in higher education, digital participation tools

1 Introduction: Leadership Challenges in University Governance

Since the 1990s, governance debates in many European higher education systems have been shaped by the guiding principles of New Public Management (NPM), which emphasise efficiency, output orientation, and accountability (de Boer et al. 2007; Gornitzka et al., 2017, Hagerer, 2022). In the following, references to efficiency should be read in this NPM sense. As Amaral and Magalhães (2023, p. 1) state: "*Under the influence of neoliberal policies and the emergence of New Public Management as a tool to reform the public sector, university governance and management were transformed by reinforcing the executive leadership and weakening collegial governance.*" Although NPM has never been fully implemented in most university systems, its core

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[2] This refers to Germany, Austria and Switzerland; the acronym is formed from the official initials for Germany (D), Austria (A) and Switzerland (CH).

ideas – such as performance-based steering, indicator-driven evaluation, and managerial accountability – have profoundly influenced the structures and expectations of university governance. In continental Europe, where collegial and committee-based decision-making has traditionally been the norm, these developments have created growing tensions between academic autonomy and formalised accountability (Shattock, 2013; Maassen, 2017). In an era of rapid technological change, geopolitical instability, and shifting societal expectations, these tensions are intensifying. Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016, p. 316) speak of the need for a *"deeper entrepreneurial mindset"* – including faster, more agile decision-making structures that challenge traditional governance cultures. Yet governance in many academic institutions, especially in the German-speaking world, remains rooted in deliberative, committee-based procedures. While such structures reflect a normative commitment to shared governance and academic freedom, they can also produce procedural inertia that limits institutional responsiveness. In this context, decision-making that is committee-based and therefore lengthy is no longer just an operational inconvenience; it creates a strategic risk that threatens the university leadership's ability to respond to current challenges. This paper examines how universities can improve the speed and quality of their decision-making while upholding shared governance and academic freedom.

The following discussion proceeds from a firm commitment to the concept of 'shared governance' in academic institutions, understood as 'institutionalised participation' rather than one-sided control by the faculty. This concept is complemented by an understanding of 'participatory leadership', whereby university leaders actively enable, moderate and respond to diverse contributions (Drew, 2010). In accordance with Olson (2009, p. 3), *"shared"* is interpreted as a condition in which *"everyone has a role"*. Consistent with the views of numerous colleagues, it is argued that the university as an idea cannot survive if its decentralised structure is replaced by top-down control (Black, 2015; Carnegie & Tuck, 2011; Estermann et al., 2011; Ginsberg, 2011; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Scherm, 2015). Precisely because universities are expert organisations, and because diverse perspectives can produce legitimate and workable solutions, shared governance is considered essential. At the same time, it is acknowledged that committee-based processes are time-consuming and that growing market orientation introduces new demands for efficiency and accountability (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). Governance models must be adapted to these demands. In this context, leadership means balance, not dissolution. It is about balancing the tensions that characterise modern university leadership: between academic autonomy and public accountability, between inclusive participation and procedural efficiency, and between open consultation and strategic orientation. These balancing acts lie at the heart of current debates on leadership, transparency, and compliance (Drew, 2010). Nevertheless, as some observers suggest, traditions of shared leadership – when effectively structured – need not slow institutions down; they can themselves become drivers of agility,

competitiveness, and global reach. From this perspective, committee-based decision-making can improve institutional responsiveness by mobilising a broader range of expertise and aligning different actors around strategic goals. This view highlights the potential of social and digital innovations to enhance participation processes – not to replace the advantages of governance embedded in institutionalised collegial traditions, but to reinforce them.

This paper explores the boundary between procedural legitimacy and institutional agility – arguing that balancing these competing demands is a core leadership challenge in modern university governance. Specifically, the paper investigates whether, and under what conditions, existing governance structures can integrate diverse contributions without resulting in procedural overload. As one possible avenue, it considers how digital tools might support participatory leadership practices under conditions of institutional complexity and external pressure.

Given the complexity of these issues, the discussion is largely theoretical, shaped by conceptual arguments and the author's practical experience as a university president. The paper focuses primarily on the relationship between university leadership and internal stakeholders (e. g. professors and staff), thereby addressing one critical dimension of governance that shapes a university's ability to navigate change. Within this scope, particular attention is given to the case of DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) universities, where the underlying tensions take on a distinctive form (de Boer et al., 2007). While some of these institutional characteristics are specific to the DACH context, the underlying questions – how to reconcile transparency, inclusivity, and institutional agility – are shared by higher education systems across the globe.

After this introduction, the paper proceeds in four sections: Section 2 outlines the multi-level governance mechanisms in universities and discusses how increased participation can produce both legitimacy and procedural complexity. Section 3 examines the role of compliance in leadership dynamics. Section 4 considers whether digital tools may help to address procedural inefficiencies without compromising shared governance. Section 5 concludes with reflections on how universities might navigate these tensions going forward.

2 Shared Governance under Pressure: Navigating the Tension Between Transparent Decision-Making and Bureaucratic Overload

To understand current tensions in university decision-making, it is essential to begin with a distinction between governance and bureaucracy – two closely linked but analytically distinct dimensions of institutional organisation. Governance refers to the frameworks, institutions, and processes that structure how decisions are made and

how authority is distributed among stakeholders (Bevir, 2010; de Boer et al., 2007). As it must be legitimised by those it governs, governance is inherently value-laden, combining normative (moral), pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Bureaucracy, by contrast, denotes a form of institutionalised rationality – characterised by rule-based procedures, formalised processes, and procedural transparency – intended to ensure legitimacy and coordination in heterogeneous academic settings (Hagerer, 2022). However, bureaucracy can become dysfunctional when excessive procedural complexity impedes responsiveness or obscures accountability in decision-making (Maassen, 2017; Ginsberg, 2011). This distinction is central to understanding the current tensions in university governance: structures designed to support committee-based decision-making may, in practice, be perceived as bureaucratic obstacles. These tensions are compounded by the fact that governance is guided by abstract normative principles, while bureaucracy relies on concrete and enforceable rules – an asymmetry that often leads to complications in practice.

Such problems are particularly evident in the governance structures of universities in the DACH region, which are built on committee-based models that prevent both top-down control by leadership and bottom-up dominance by faculty (de Boer et al., 2007; Stockinger, 2018). Decision-making authority is distributed across multi-level bodies that link central administration with relatively autonomous faculties. Despite differences in legal frameworks across regions, most institutions adhere to the principles of coordinated, shared governance.

Within these principles, academic freedom is constitutionally protected. The basic laws of Germany (Article 5(3)), Austria (Article 17) and Switzerland (Article 20) all grant scientists autonomy in research and teaching, while the state is responsible for funding and regulation (Teichler et al., 2013). The governance system of universities includes decision-making bodies at both central and departmental levels. Central leadership is vested in the university president or rector, who bears ultimate responsibility, supported by other actors as defined, for instance, in the Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act (BayHIG):

- Academic Senate: Responsible for core academic matters, including degree programs, professorial appointments, and research priorities (BayHIG, Art. 34).
- University Council (Board): Comprising internal and external members, the council provides strategic oversight and performs supervisory functions, including partial veto rights on key decisions (BayHIG, Art. 35).
- University Leadership Team: Consists of the president (or rector), vice-presidents (e.g. for teaching, research, and digitalisation), and the chancellor, who is responsible for administration and finances (BayHIG, Arts. 31–33).

- Extended Leadership Team: Typically includes deans to align faculty-level and university-wide objectives. Governance practices at all levels are shaped by faculty-specific norms and disciplinary cultures.

In particular, university councils should be highlighted here as central institutional elements for mediating different demands in university governance. They enable a bridging of institutional autonomy and public accountability, and their changing role can be understood as an expression of New Public Management within the committee structures of the university. Not only in Germany, but wherever academic freedom prevails (Carnegie & Tuck, 2011), they function as key transparency platforms, enabling structured information exchange between leadership, faculty, and external stakeholders (Stockinger, 2018). By publishing financial reports, strategic goals, and performance metrics, boards fulfil both normative expectations of openness and rule-based procedures. As Stockinger (2018) argues, university councils play a key role in making the 'ivory tower' more transparent by incorporating societal perspectives into academic governance and enhancing institutional trust through transparent resource allocation.

Carson (2020) highlights transparency as essential for ethical university governance, defining it as the condition under which *"full disclosure of policies, regulations, procedures and practices within an organisation"* (p. 1229) is given. Transparency comprises four dimensions: *formal* (information disclosure), *procedural* (traceable decision-making), *outcome* (reasoned justification), and *perceived transparency* (subjective sense of fairness and legitimacy). Whereas the first three can be formally structured, the fourth depends on trust, institutional culture, and responsiveness. By disclosing strategic plans and inviting stakeholder scrutiny, universities align with both ethical standards and principles of shared governance. This dual role underscores transparency's centrality in modern university leadership.

While transparency is a core principle of university governance, structural bureaucracy can paradoxically undermine it by reducing efficiency, weakening shared governance (Maassen, 2017), and fostering procedural redundancy across bodies, which reinforces bureaucratic inertia (Tiede, 2021; Hagerer, 2022). Faculty, already stretched by teaching, research, and administration, often perceive committee-based duties as a burden and a waste of time (Teichler et al., 2013). This can lead to fatigue and disengagement, resulting in decision-making power becoming concentrated in the hands of a small group of people who specialise in committee work (McClure & Hicklin-Fryar, 2022). This is exacerbated by fragmented structures and inaccessible procedural rules, which make participation difficult for most stakeholders, particularly those lacking legal expertise (Scholz & Stein, 2015; Gralke & Scherm, 2015). Some, such as those at Penn State, have reported that shared governance has been captured by bureaucratic elites (Ni, 2024). This shift in power towards administration marginalises academic voices

and stifles innovation (Ginsberg, 2011; Shattock, 2013). Interpretations of academic freedom under constitutional protection differ depending on disciplinary cultures and expectations (Jungwirth, 2025), while perceptions of governance are shaped less by formal rules than by lived experience (Marín et al., 2022), complicating efforts to enhance transparency and institutional trust (Shattock, 2003). Additionally, the partial confidentiality of body deliberations – though often necessary – can fuel mistrust if perceived as self-serving. At the same time, the practical implementation of transparency poses challenges, as universities must determine the appropriate level of detail in meeting documentation – balancing the benefits of openness against resource constraints and legal risks, particularly in appointment procedures where fairness requires justification, yet excessive detail may trigger litigation and compromise confidentiality (Silber, 2011; Stafford-Cotton, 2021).

Building on the experience-driven account of governance tensions, a more conceptual perspective distinguishes between *rules* and *principles* as two normative instruments of regulation (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 47). *Rules* are specific, prescriptive directives designed for unambiguous application; they are efficient where predictability and enforceability are paramount. *Principles*, by contrast, are general normative commitments that guide judgment and require contextual interpretation (Braithwaite, 2002). While both are essential for institutional legitimacy, their interaction often generates tension: efforts to operationalise abstract governance principles such as transparency, equity, or academic freedom can lead to a proliferation of formal rules that constrain discretion and innovation. Ortmann (2010) cautions against this trend in university governance, highlighting how rules tend to *"drift"* (p. 204) in practice – their meaning and application shift over time, potentially diverging from their original normative intent. This drift, coupled with the performative, routine-like character of rule-following (Ortmann, 2010), can result in a governance culture where procedural effectiveness replaces deliberative engagement. As universities increasingly codify value commitments – ranging from quality assurance to sustainability – into administrative routines, the risk emerges that the 'spirit' of governance principles is subordinated to their formalised implementation. This dynamic contributes directly to the bureaucratic overload observed in committee-based structures: while university bodies and procedures are designed to enhance transparency and institutional accountability, their growing complexity often undermines these very aims. Instead of fostering broad engagement, they may contribute to the alienation of faculty, increase procedural fatigue, and reinforce the perception of a dominant executive leadership rather than genuine shared governance. The challenge for universities, then, is to streamline decision-making processes, clarify the roles of overlapping governing bodies, and prevent transparency commitments from paradoxically generating new layers of opacity. Otherwise, the very structures intended to support shared governance may in effect impede it – resulting in disengaged faculty and unchecked leadership.

However, it should be noted that not all of these challenges originate within the university. External demands – such as societal expectations for demonstrable commitments to sustainability, equity, or civic engagement – often translate into regulatory documentation requirements that further intensify bureaucratic pressures (Jongbloed et al., 2008). In this context, Kühl (2025) speaks of a *"value orientation monitoring bureaucracy",* highlighting the paradox whereby principles become subject to formal control. Accordingly, the call to free scientific institutions from these bureaucratic burdens is growing louder, especially among scientists. A notable example can be seen in a Leopoldina discussion paper entitled *More freedom – less regulation* (Haug et al., 2025).

3 The Compliance Paradox: How University Leaders Navigate Between Responsibility and Control

Black (2015) emphasises the necessity of leadership in universities to address increasing competitiveness, economisation, and the evolving expectations of students as digital natives. These developments require strategic foresight and institutional agility, while simultaneously challenging established academic traditions. However, conventional leadership models have proven inadequate in aligning the procedural constraints of university governance with long-term goals in research and teaching (König & Graf-Vlachy, 2020; Peus, 2019; Wolff, 2022). Blaschke et al. (2014) argue that performance-oriented management and participatory leadership are not mutually exclusive but can coexist through micro-patterns of communication, such as agenda setting, reflection, and iterative adjustment. This dialogical process supports intellectual freedom and helps mitigate resistance to change. Yet, Black (2015) cautions that an overemphasis on leadership communication risks reinforcing metric-driven, bureaucratic, and top-down patterns of control. Effective leadership requires not only explanation but systemic transformation, including the alignment of structures and resources (Drew, 2010). This may explain why professors often value the ability of university leaders to balance competing interests more than rhetorical skill (Krüger & Rudinger, 2025).

Once again, striking the right balance between providing strategic direction and respecting shared governance remains one of the central challenges of university leadership. Yet it is undisputed that leaders must bear formal and personal responsibility for fulfilling governmental, legal, and institutional obligations (Wissenschaftsrat, 2018) – a complex field increasingly captured under the term *"compliance"* (Bastedo, 2009, p. 211). In academic institutions, compliance refers to a structured and anticipatory form of self-regulation aimed at ensuring lawful and ethically sound conduct through internal rules, responsibilities, and risk management systems. As a concept of *regulated self-regulation*, it bridges the limits of external legal oversight by requiring universities

to design and implement their own preventive mechanisms – thereby safeguarding institutional integrity, public trust, and academic autonomy (Schröder, 2020). Its core purpose is to align organisational structures and procedures with legal obligations, thus enabling members to comply with the law in their daily work (Weber 2020). In practice, this includes transparent hiring, conflict-of-interest checks, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-compliant data handling, and legally robust procedures for dealing with academic misconduct. Although many of these duties are externally mandated – by state law or research funding bodies – faculty often experience compliance less as a shared institutional framework than as a top-down administrative imposition (Tierney & Langford, 2014; Maassen, 2017).

Compliance structures, to be sure, play a vital role: they standardise procedures, reduce liability, and support institutional legitimacy (Benedek, 2016). University leaders are bound by these frameworks and must comply with both legal mandates and informal organisational norms. However, Abbate (2010, p. 36) notes that they can fall into a *"compliance trap"* by viewing compliance with formal rules as their organisation's primary goal, thereby narrowing their strategic perspective. At the same time, compliance obligations do not merely constrain leadership discretion; they also expand it. By assigning responsibility for legal conformity to institutional leaders, compliance regimes create interpretive space – enabling leaders to assert influence through discretionary implementation. This strategic use of ambiguity can be described as 'playing off the walls'. In areas not explicitly regulated by law or university statutes, university leaders exercise significant discretionary space – potentially enabling integrity-driven governance, but also opening avenues for the consolidation of control. This dual character renders compliance a double-edged sword. While leaders are legally charged with *"the protection and enforcement of the law in all areas of the university"* (BayHIG, Art. 31(3)5), they are also empowered to shape compliance regimes in ways that may bypass or undermine the principles of shared governance. Confidentiality obligations in personnel matters further expand their discretionary space. As Ginsberg (2011) observes, administrators may instrumentalise civility norms or speech codes to suppress dissent – revealing how compliance frameworks can be deployed not only to ensure integrity but also to constrain contestation and entrench hierarchical authority.

A telling example of this dynamic is provided by Egner and Uhlenwinkel (2024) in their study "If You're Disruptive, You Have to Go! The Dismissal of Critical Professors from Universities". They document a number of troubling incidences in which university leaders increasingly resort to dismissals, citing allegations such as *"leadership misbehaviour"* (p. 39) *or "ideological insubordination"* (p. 48). These dismissals tend to erode academic freedom, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups such as female and/or foreign university members. Egner and Uhlenwinkel further illustrate the ambivalence of compliance rules by analysing a case in which alleged bullying by

a female professor was sanctioned as a compliance violation – despite broader indications of gender bias and unequal treatment. A parallel case within the Max Planck Society, reported by Abbott (2021), underscores similar concerns: here, 145 senior female scientists protested dismissals and demotions, arguing that compliance procedures – despite their formal fairness – served to obscure systemic discrimination. Both cases reveal how compliance mechanisms, while intended to uphold integrity, can be instrumentalised in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies and silence dissent.

As compliance management becomes more central to university governance, its influence on leadership behaviour and institutional culture intensifies (Wernsmann 2020; Weber 2020). Risk aversion fosters increasingly complex approval processes, reporting duties, and monitoring systems – shifting the organisational ethos from academic freedom toward fear-based conformity (Dodge et al. 2016) and curtailing the flexibility essential for interdisciplinary and experimental research (Enders 2013).

4 Digital Strategies for Balancing Compliance, Transparency, and Leadership

The complexities outlined so far – from the transparency paradox within governance structures to discretionary interpretations of leadership tasks and compliance regulations – demonstrate how faculty members and other stakeholders can become disengaged if they perceive limited opportunities for meaningful participation. When hierarchical or opaque processes dominate, frustration can lead to resignation (literally or figuratively) rather than constructive problem-solving (Ginsberg 2011; Maassen 2017; Ni 2024). This disengagement is not merely a structural issue; it is also cultural: do actors trust that their voice matters? Is dissent tolerated and processed? Are feedback loops institutionalised – and are they visibly consequential? It is at this point that Hirschman's (1970) 'Exit – Voice – Loyalty' model becomes crucial. It offers a useful lens for understanding disengagement dynamics in university governance. When institutional members experience dissatisfaction, they can exit (physically or psychologically), voice their concerns, or remain loyal in spite of grievances. The risk of 'silent exit' – long-term disengagement without formal departure – argues for institutional arrangements that enable and reward meaningful participation, or 'voice' (Brittian, 2023; Teichler et al., 2013).

From shared governance (McNulty & Wampler, 2015) to Web 2.0 e-democracy (OECD, 2023), the literature has long emphasised that inclusive procedures can expand engagement. In the context of higher education, digital platforms such as Stud.IP, HIS, Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas – along with feedback tools, online voting mechanisms, and real-time sentiment trackers – appear to lower formal barriers to participation (Chugh et al., 2023). To promote meaningful engagement, it is crucial to distinguish between digital tools (technological enablers), committee-based practices (recurrent

behavioural routines), and governance structures (institutionalised decision-making frameworks). Digitalisation can only meaningfully enhance participation when these three elements are aligned (Chadwick, 2009).

However, the decisive question is one of cultural fit (Rein, 2017): do these instruments resonate with the university's institutional identity, its normative self-understanding, and its internal distribution of power? Or do they merely introduce an additional layer of procedural complexity without altering actual decision rights or accountability pathways?

This is precisely where Morozov's (2014) critique of *technological solutionism* – the misguided belief that deeply rooted organisational, cultural, and political challenges can be solved by technical means alone – becomes analytically productive. He reminds us that what may appear inefficient – such as slow, negotiated, and compromise-driven procedures – can, in democratic settings, be constitutive of legitimacy. Translating this insight to university governance means recognising that participation cannot be automated. While digital platforms may record input, they cannot substitute for the social and political work of integrating dissent, weighing competing interests, and translating deliberation into binding decisions (Chadwick, 2009). Digitalisation can enhance responsiveness and broaden access to decision-making – but only if it is embedded in a genuine culture of shared governance. Where governance structures remain unchanged, there is a risk that digital tools will generate simulations of committee-based processes that make participation even more pointless than it is currently perceived by many university members.

A project by Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) offers a compelling case of digitally supported shared governance. The 'Moral Deliberation Chamber on Collaboration with the Fossil Fuel Industry' employed the World Café method – facilitating multiple rounds of small-group dialogue to encourage open and creative exchange (Walker 2023). In order to increase participation, those efforts were accompanied by a digital Populytics consultation, using real-time analytics to surface community preferences and structured moral deliberation. Its aim was to engage students and staff in a structured reflection on the university's external partnerships. Crucially, its success rested not on technology alone but on four enabling conditions: (1) openness to dissent, (2) transparent moderation and documentation, (3) routinised feedback loops linking input to outcomes, and (4) a leadership commitment to treat the process as binding institutional learning rather than public relations (G&I International / TU Delft-FBI Consultancy, 2024). In short, technology amplified voice because culture and procedure made voice consequential.

This example clearly illustrates a key point: a successful digital governance approach must be culturally embedded if it is to reconcile institutional agility with shared governance. Do the university's norms, identity, and incentive structures support low-threshold, consequential participation (Rein, 2017)? Is change pursued incrementally and reversibly, as Popper's (2013, p. 340) idea of *"piecemeal social engineering"* suggests? As Suchman (1995) observes, pragmatic legitimacy arises from meeting instrumental demands, moral legitimacy from adhering to altruistic ideals, and cognitive legitimacy from conforming to established models or standards. For universities, even well-designed digital participation processes will only be perceived as legitimate if they align with established governance practices and cultural expectations. Such alignment can foster affective commitment – the motivational foundation of institutional change (Jackenkroll & Scherm, 2016). Yet without safeguards, digital tools risk reinforcing power asymmetries, excluding those with lower digital literacy, or creating the illusion of participation without real influence – a form of solutionism criticised by Morozov (2014). They may also generate data protection and confidentiality vulnerabilities that erode trust. To strengthen rather than weaken shared governance, technological innovation must be accompanied by robust procedural and cultural safeguards.

Without trust in leadership, respect for differing opinions, and shared responsibility in practice, digital participation becomes a mere procedural exercise. With these cultural and procedural anchors in place, however, digital instruments can meaningfully reduce disengagement, strengthen legitimacy, and render the "voice" option both attractive and effective – precisely the antidote to the silent exit Hirschman (1970) warned about, and the only way to avoid the kind of solutionism Morozov (2014) so convincingly criticises.

5 Conclusion: Rebalancing University Governance in Times of Complexity

Universities today are facing a transformation. Internal governance traditions rooted in academic freedom and shared governance are intersecting with external pressures for efficiency, output orientation, and accountability – hallmarks of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (de Boer et al., 2007; Amaral & Magalhães, 2023). This article examines the challenges faced by university leaders, particularly in the DACH region, in balancing academic autonomy and public accountability, inclusive participation and procedural efficiency, and open deliberation and strategic orientation. It has argued that the key leadership task is not to replace one mode of governance with another, but to balance their competing logics in a way that sustains legitimacy, effectiveness, and trust. Shared governance is a cornerstone of academic institutions, but bureaucratic structures can stifle engagement and delay decision-making. Similarly, compliance frameworks are vital for integrity and risk management, but they can

constrain academic freedom if they are overly proceduralised or strategically instrumentalised. Digital tools have the potential to improve participation and responsiveness. However, if they are not embedded in cultures that value dissent, pluralism and collective responsibility, they will produce empty rituals of 'solutionism'.

Considering these tensions, it is imperative that universities resist the drift toward rule-based proceduralism and reaffirm their commitment to principle-based governance. This means creating decision-making processes that are transparent and legally sound. They must also be inclusive, dialogical and capable of learning. It is vital that compliance mechanisms clarify, rather than obscure, institutional discretion. Committee-based structures must be designed to yield consequences. Digital technologies must be integrated incrementally and reflectively. They must align with institutional identity, stakeholder needs and cultural readiness.

For university leadership and policymakers, the implications are clear:

- *Legal compliance* must be embedded in governance structures that preserve professional autonomy and respect academic freedom.
- *Transparency* should be pursued in a way that enables understanding, trust, and dialogue – not merely documentation.
- *Digitalisation* should be treated not as a solution, but as an instrument to support committee-based practices that have procedural consequences.
- *Leadership legitimacy* increasingly depends on the ability to balance institutional agility with inclusive participation, open deliberation, and ethical oversight.

This is not a call for radical disruption. It is a call for deliberate, iterative reform – anchored in Karl Popper's 'piecemeal social engineering'. Universities should begin with manageable projects – such as identity-building initiatives or feedback-based decision processes – and evaluate their effectiveness before scaling up. A digital participation dashboard, for example, could help visualise ongoing decision-making and clarify how stakeholder input influences outcomes. In this way, universities can learn to govern themselves not only more efficiently, as emphasised in NPM-inspired reforms, but also more meaningfully.

Ultimately, the future of university governance will not be shaped by compliance systems or digital platforms alone. It will be determined by the institutional capacity to align structures, norms, and cultures in a way that fosters responsibility, transparency, and shared purpose. Governance, in this sense, is not a technical matter – it is a moral and institutional act of balancing competing claims in a world of growing complexity.

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