
Decision-Making Processes at Public and Private Universities in Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article offers a comparative analysis of decision-making processes at public and private universities in Poland, focusing on governance structures, the distribution of authority among institutional actors (rector, senate, faculties), and the factors shaping academic and administrative strategies. It examines how these processes affect institutional effectiveness, educational quality, innovation, and adaptability to socio-economic change.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study applies a comparative qualitative approach, drawing on legal frameworks (e.g., the Law on Higher Education and Science), accreditation standards of the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA), and national and international reports (GUS, OECD, EUA). It reconstructs decision-making through four stages—information acquisition, analysis, implementation, and evaluation—and includes a comparative case analysis of one public and one private university.

Findings: Public universities operate within formalized, hierarchical frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability but limit flexibility. Private universities, in turn, adopt managerial and market-oriented governance characterized by autonomy, centralized leadership, and adaptability, though they face financial and legitimacy challenges. Effective decision-making in both sectors depends on stakeholder integration, labor-market alignment, financial sustainability, and crisis readiness. The study suggests that hybrid governance—combining collegial participation with managerial agility—offers the most balanced path to institutional development and competitiveness.

Practical Implications: Recommendations include: (1) harmonizing collegial and executive authority; (2) strengthening data-driven governance; (3) diversifying financial resources; (4) integrating digitalization and internationalization; and (5) institutionalizing adaptive leadership and crisis preparedness.

Originality/Value: The article provides an updated synthesis of governance in Polish higher education and offers empirically grounded recommendations tailored to the Polish legal and socio-economic context.

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1. Introduction

Understanding decision-making in higher education institutions is key to assessing how governance frameworks influence academic, administrative, and strategic outcomes. In Poland, this issue gains particular relevance due to the coexistence of public and private universities, differing markedly in legal status, funding, and organizational culture. Rooted in the *Law on Higher Education and Science* (2018/2024), these distinctions have created two complementary yet contrasting governance models.

Public universities, financed largely from the state budget, operate within administrative law and remain accountable to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Their governance is defined by statutory provisions and internal regulations determining the competencies of the rector, senate, and faculty councils. Decision-making is guided by collegiality and shared governance—principles ensuring transparency and procedural legitimacy but often producing bureaucratic inertia. Complex approval procedures frequently delay reforms and curricular innovations (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; PKA, 2019; Antonowicz, 2021).

Private universities, by contrast, function under market principles, enjoying broader autonomy that enables quick decisions on program design, staff recruitment, and external partnerships. Their decision-making tends to be managerial, dominated by the chancellor (as founder or owner) and the rector, allowing flexibility and responsiveness to labor-market needs. However, this concentration of authority can compromise collegial participation and increase financial vulnerability, as institutions rely heavily on tuition income (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Both sectors face common pressures—demographic decline, intensified competition, evolving accreditation standards, and technological transformation. Internationalization and shifting expectations of students and employers compel

institutions to redesign their governance and strategic planning systems toward more data-informed, adaptive, and stakeholder-inclusive models (FRP/KRASP, 2024; OECD, 2024; Kwiek, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, decision-making can be viewed as a cyclical process encompassing problem identification, analysis of alternatives, implementation, and evaluation. In practice, this process is shaped by institutional culture, leadership style, and academic autonomy. Public universities generally favor long-term strategic planning and incremental decisions, while private institutions rely on pragmatic, short-term responses to market dynamics. Both models ultimately aim to ensure educational quality, institutional sustainability, and societal relevance (Leja, 2013; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

This article explores these processes from a comparative perspective, demonstrating how institutional type affects governance mechanisms and outcomes. While public universities emphasize procedural accountability and collective legitimacy, private institutions excel in efficiency and adaptability. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches provides a foundation for hybrid governance models that reconcile transparency with innovation—an essential condition for the future competitiveness of Polish higher education.

2. Characteristics of Polish Universities

The Polish higher education system is a dual structure comprising public and private institutions, both governed by the *Law on Higher Education and Science* (2018/2024). This coexistence promotes diversity and competition, combining state-regulated stability with market-oriented innovation. Although both sectors share a common mission—to provide quality education and conduct research—their governance logics, funding, and strategic priorities differ significantly.

Public universities, supported mainly by the state budget, are subject to administrative and accountability regulations. Their mission includes widening access to higher education, advancing research, and contributing to regional and national development. Private universities, established after 1989, embody Poland's transition to a market economy and the growing role of non-state actors in education. Despite their smaller scale, they have become important agents of innovation and flexibility within the academic system (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024; GUS, 2025).

In recent years, the distinction between sectors has become increasingly blurred. Public institutions have adopted managerial tools and efficiency-oriented practices, while private universities have developed internal quality assurance and academic governance mechanisms resembling those of the public sector. This convergence aligns with broader European trends such as the Bologna Process, performance-based funding, and digital transformation (FRP/KRASP, 2024; Antonowicz, 2021).

2.1 Public Universities

Public universities represent the most traditional segment of Poland's higher education. Operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, they are financed primarily by public funds and expected to combine academic autonomy with public accountability. Their mission extends beyond education to include research, innovation, and civic engagement (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; PKA, 2019).

These institutions vary in scale—from large comprehensive universities such as the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University to specialized academies and regional institutions. Their multi-layered structure includes senates, faculty councils, departments, and research centers. The rector, as the chief executive authority, is supported by vice-rectors, deans, and administrative chancellors (Antonowicz, 2021; Kwiek, 2021).

Decision-making is guided by collegiality and procedural rigor, involving broad consultation and compliance with statutory regulations. While this ensures transparency, it often slows implementation of reforms, particularly in digitalization or curriculum modernization. Nonetheless, this model supports institutional stability, academic traditions, and long-term credibility (Leja, 2013; Garczarek, 2018).

Current challenges include demographic decline, limited funding, and competition from private and foreign institutions. To remain sustainable, public universities must enhance strategic management, modernize teaching, and deepen collaboration with socio-economic partners (FRP/KRASP, 2024; OECD, 2024).

2.2 Private Universities

Private universities (non-public HEIs) emerged in the early 1990s as part of Poland's systemic transformation. Initially focused on business and social sciences, they later diversified into health, technology, and design, thereby broadening educational access and competitiveness. Their agility allows them to adjust rapidly to labor-market and technological shifts (Pisarska, Karpacz, and Pisarski, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Their governance is managerial: authority is concentrated in the chancellor (often the founder) and the rector. This structure enables swift decision-making and responsiveness to market needs, but can reduce transparency and collegial participation (EUA, 2023; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Financially dependent on tuition fees, private institutions face vulnerability to enrollment fluctuations. Many pursue diversification through external partnerships, EU projects, and international cooperation. Their smaller scale allows closer

faculty–student interaction and rapid innovation, though maintaining quality and reputation remains a challenge (FRP/KRASP, 2024; OECD, 2024).

In recent years, some private universities have strengthened their academic legitimacy through PKA accreditation, quality assurance systems, and digital infrastructure investment. Their success depends on balancing economic efficiency with academic credibility and social responsibility (EUA, 2023; Pisarska, Karpacz, and Pisarski, 2024).

3. Models of University Governance

University governance in Poland reflects both historical traditions and contemporary reform agendas. Two dominant models can be distinguished: the traditional collegial-academic model and the modern managerial-corporate model. These frameworks embody different conceptions of autonomy, accountability, and the university's societal mission (Leja, 2013; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Rooted in the European tradition of self-governing academic communities, this model emphasizes shared decision-making and scholarly authority. Power is distributed among elected bodies such as senates, faculty councils, and rectorates, with academics playing a central role in policy formation. Decisions are made through formal, consultative procedures promoting legitimacy and continuity (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024).

The model's strengths include transparency, academic legitimacy, and protection of academic freedom, but it is often criticized for bureaucratic inertia and slow responsiveness to change. Despite these constraints, it remains a foundation of academic identity, safeguarding collective responsibility and intellectual integrity (Antonowicz, 2021; Leja, 2013).

The managerial model arose from pressures to improve performance, accountability, and responsiveness to societal needs. It emphasizes strategic management, measurable outcomes, and professionalized leadership. Authority is centralized in the rector and chancellor, and decisions are guided by strategic planning and performance metrics rather than collective deliberation (Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019; EUA, 2023).

This model supports efficiency, innovation, and rapid adaptation but risks marginalizing academic voices if managerial priorities dominate. The challenge is to balance professional management with self-governance to preserve institutional legitimacy (OECD, 2024; Kwiek, 2021).

Polish universities increasingly adopt hybrid governance, merging academic collegiality with managerial agility. This model integrates traditional academic bodies with professional management units responsible for finance, quality

assurance, and strategic planning. Decision-making becomes more evidence-based and participatory, aligning managerial efficiency with academic inclusivity.

Hybrid governance allows institutions to operate effectively in a competitive environment while retaining their academic mission, balancing transparency and autonomy, and aligning with European trends in higher education reform (Leja, 2013; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

4. Decision-Making Structures

Decision-making structures in Polish universities are multi-tiered and shaped by the *Law on Higher Education and Science* (2018/2024). Authority is distributed across three principal levels: the rector, the senate, and the faculties, ensuring a balance between executive leadership and collegial participation.

Public universities are oriented toward collective deliberation and legal compliance, whereas private institutions emphasize managerial efficiency and strategic control (Leja, 2013; EUA, 2023).

The rector is the highest executive authority, responsible for strategic direction, academic quality, and external representation. In public universities, rectors are elected by the academic community, ensuring legitimacy but sometimes leading to internal political tensions. In private institutions, rectors are typically appointed by the chancellor, which supports swift decision-making but reduces collegial oversight (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Effective rectors balance internal interests with external pressures, combining managerial competence with academic leadership (Antonowicz, 2021; OECD, 2024). Increasingly, rectors are expected to act as transformational leaders—driving innovation, securing funding, and strengthening international partnerships.

The senate serves as the highest collegial body, responsible for academic policy, internal regulations, program approval, and institutional strategy. It ensures participatory governance through broad representation of faculty, students, and administrators.

In public universities, senates wield significant power; in private institutions, their role is often advisory. Nonetheless, they remain essential for maintaining transparency, inclusivity, and academic autonomy (PKA, 2019; Leja, 2013; EUA, 2023).

Faculties are operational units that translate institutional strategy into educational and research practice. Led by deans and supported by faculty councils, they oversee curriculum, research, and personnel management.

Faculties link strategic governance with implementation, ensuring responsiveness to labor-market needs and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Their growing role as centers of innovation strengthens institutional performance and engagement with external partners (Leja, 2013; PKA, 2019; OECD, 2024).

Ultimately, the effectiveness of university governance in Poland depends on coordinated interaction among the rectorate, senate, and faculties. Transparent communication and mutual accountability across these levels are essential for balancing autonomy with responsibility and ensuring sustainable institutional development.

5. The Decision-Making Process

Decision-making in Polish higher education institutions (HEIs) is a dynamic, multi-stage process combining analytical, administrative, and participatory elements. It reflects the tension between institutional autonomy and regulatory compliance, as well as between tradition and innovation.

Generally, decision-making follows four interrelated stages: (1) information and contextual analysis; (2) generation and evaluation of options; (3) adoption and implementation; (4) monitoring and evaluation. Each stage involves multiple stakeholders and relies on the integration of evidence, institutional experience, and strategic vision (Leja, 2013; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

The process begins with the collection of internal and external data—ranging from institutional performance metrics to labor market analyses and government policies (OECD, 2024; EUA, 2023). Analytical units and quality assurance offices play a central role in preparing evidence-based assessments. Common tools include SWOT analysis, benchmarking, and risk assessment.

While public universities often focus on legal compliance and national priorities, private institutions emphasize market positioning and financial feasibility. As digital transformation advances, data-driven decision-making becomes an essential element of modern university governance (OECD, 2024; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

This stage involves developing alternative strategies and assessing their potential outcomes. Decision-makers—rectors, senates, and deans—evaluate options concerning program development, organizational restructuring, or resource allocation.

Evaluation combines quantitative and qualitative methods and increasingly incorporates stakeholder perspectives (students, employers, local communities). This participatory approach aligns with European trends toward inclusive and socially responsive governance (EUA, 2023).

Decisions are guided by three main criteria: (1) alignment with the university's mission, (2) financial and operational feasibility, (3) long-term impact on quality and competitiveness.

Formal approval depends on institutional structure and the type of decision—whether by senate, rector, or chancellor. Implementation requires resource mobilization, internal coordination, and clear communication.

Private universities, due to centralized management, tend to act more swiftly; public universities follow more complex procedures that ensure legitimacy but delay execution (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; Antonowicz, 2021). Successful implementation depends on transparent communication and institutional trust.

The final stage focuses on assessing outcomes and integrating feedback into future decisions. Internal audits, satisfaction surveys, and performance indicators inform institutional learning. Evaluations follow the quality assurance frameworks of the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA, 2019) and are often complemented by external reviews (OECD, EUA).

The cyclical feedback model—plan–do–check–act (PDCA)—encourages continuous improvement and accountability, transforming decision-making into a process of organizational learning.

Decision-making constitutes a strategic capability that shapes a university's competitiveness and adaptability. Institutions that combine analytical rigor with inclusive governance tend to perform better in volatile environments. Strengthening decision-making capacity through leadership development, digital tools, and stakeholder consultation is thus essential for institutional resilience (Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021; OECD, 2024; EUA, 2023).

6. Factors Determining Decision-Making

Decision-making in HEIs is influenced by an interplay of internal and external factors. Together they determine how institutions balance autonomy with accountability, adapt to labor-market dynamics, and respond to policy reforms (Leja, 2013; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

6.1 Internal Factors

Governance Structure and Hierarchy: In public universities, decisions are made through collegial bodies (senates, faculty councils), ensuring inclusivity but limiting speed. Private universities rely on centralized managerial structures, enabling efficiency but reducing participation (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Institutional Culture and Communication: A transparent, dialogical culture fosters shared responsibility and innovation, while hierarchical cultures risk resistance to change. Effective vertical and horizontal communication supports coherent decision-making (Leja, 2013; EUA, 2023).

Leadership and Managerial Competence: Strategic, participatory leadership enhances innovation and collaboration. Leaders who combine analytical and interpersonal skills strengthen organizational trust and adaptability (Antonowicz, 2021; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

Resources: Financial and human resources determine strategic feasibility. Public universities face budget constraints, while private ones are sensitive to enrollment trends. Efficient financial planning and investment in digital infrastructure are crucial (Pisarska, Karpacz & Pisarski, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Information Systems: Modern management information systems (MIS) enable evidence-based governance. Institutions with robust analytical tools are better equipped for adaptive decision-making (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

6.2 External Factors

Legal and Policy Environment: The *Law on Higher Education and Science* (2018/2024) defines the limits of autonomy and governance. Evolving national and EU policies promote internationalization and digital transformation, encouraging modernization (PKA, 2019; OECD, 2024).

Economic Conditions: Macroeconomic stability and government priorities affect funding. Public universities rely on state budgets, while private institutions depend on tuition. Diversification through grants and partnerships enhances resilience (FRP/KRASP, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Labor Market and Societal Expectations: Universities must align curricula with labor-market needs and societal demands for inclusivity and sustainability (EUA, 2023; GUS, 2025).

Globalization and Competition: Internationalization exposes universities to global rankings and cross-border collaborations. Engagement in global networks strengthens innovation but increases competition (Kwiek, 2021; OECD, 2024).

Technological and Demographic Trends: Digital transformation and demographic decline shape recruitment and teaching strategies. Investing in technology and international outreach is essential for maintaining competitiveness (OECD, 2024; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

6.3 Interdependence and Synthesis

Internal and external factors are interdependent: legislation influences internal structures, while organizational culture shapes responses to external pressures. Public universities adapt more slowly but with higher legitimacy; private institutions act faster but face financial risk. Successful institutions develop reflexive governance—linking internal capabilities with external demands through data and collaboration (EUA, 2023; Leja, 2013; OECD, 2024).

7. Participation of the Academic Community

Academic participation is a cornerstone of university governance and legitimacy. Faculty, students, and administrative staff contribute to decision-making at different levels, ensuring inclusivity and shared responsibility (EUA, 2023; Leja, 2013). Participation strengthens institutional learning and adaptability, though its scope varies between public and private universities (Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019; Antonowicz, 2021).

Faculty members influence decisions on teaching, research, and program development through senates and faculty councils. Students participate via senates, program councils, and student parliaments, providing insights into educational quality. Administrative staff ensure operational feasibility. This tripartite structure integrates diverse expertise and fosters cohesive governance (PKA, 2019; EUA, 2023; Leja, 2013).

Student involvement enhances democratic legitimacy and responsiveness to educational needs. Students with voting rights in collegial bodies influence program design and quality assurance. Beyond formal representation, they participate through forums, associations, and participatory budgeting, promoting dialogue and transparency (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

In public universities, representation is formalized but slower; private institutions often involve students more flexibly, though with less statutory authority. Ensuring participation that is substantive rather than symbolic remains an ongoing challenge (Leja, 2013; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Faculty play a dual role—academic and administrative—ensuring that decisions reflect scholarly standards and institutional missions. Public universities preserve strong collegial traditions, while private institutions rely more on advisory involvement. Strengthening academic participation in managerial contexts enhances credibility and quality (Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; OECD, 2024; Antonowicz, 2021).

Collaboration between faculty and students transforms governance into a process of shared learning and innovation. Regular consultations and open forums enhance

policy legitimacy and institutional cohesion. Such dialogue also strengthens relations with external stakeholders—employers, local authorities, and civic organizations (EUA, 2023).

Maintaining active communication is vital for both public universities, constrained by bureaucracy, and private ones, which must ensure transparency within managerial frameworks (Leja, 2013; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019).

Participation should be viewed not merely as a procedural element but as a strategic asset. Inclusive governance enhances innovation, legitimacy, and resilience. Building a participatory culture requires institutional mechanisms that reward engagement and integrate feedback into strategic planning.

Universities embedding participation in governance achieve higher sustainability, quality, and social relevance (EUA, 2023; Leja, 2013; OECD, 2024).

8. Case Studies of Decision-Making in Polish Universities

This section presents a concise comparative case analysis illustrating how governance arrangements shape decision-making in practice. The comparison concerns one non-public (private) university and one public vocational university with a comparable number of students, similar disciplinary profiles, and a similar period of operation on the higher education market.

The goal is not to rank institutions but to identify governance mechanisms that facilitate or hinder timely and legitimate decisions consistent with strategic goals (The Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; PKA, 2019; EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024; GUS, 2025).

Empirically, both institutions respond to convergent pressures—demographic decline, changing labour-market expectations, and digital transformation—but do so through different governance logics.

The private university relies on managerial coordination and concentrated authority, which supports speed and adaptability. The public university emphasizes collegial participation and formal compliance, which strengthens procedural legitimacy and accountability but may slow execution of reforms.

Across both cases, two patterns recur in successful decisions: diversification of the educational offer and development of structured partnerships with employers, both associated with improved graduate outcomes and higher student satisfaction (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024; Pisarska, Karpacz & Pisarski, 2024).

Table 1. Comparative snapshot: Selection criteria: similar size, fields of study, and period of market presence.

Criterion	Private University	Public University
Legal status	Non-public higher education institution	Public vocational university
Founding body	Private individual (Chancellor–founder)	Ministry responsible for higher education
Governance structure	Chancellor (founder), Rector, Vice-Rectors, Deans	Rector, Vice-Rectors, Chancellor (administration), Deans
Decision-making autonomy	High internal autonomy; substantial influence of the Chancellor	Decisions taken under The Law on Higher Education and Science and the university statute
Dominant decision-making model	Managerial (Chancellor → Rector)	Collegial/academic (Senate → Rector)
Role of the Rector	Manages teaching, research, and external cooperation under the owner’s oversight	Highest executive authority with broad statutory powers
Role of the Chancellor	Central, decision-making, operational, and strategic	Technical/administrative (asset management)
Organizational structure	Faculties, departments, chairs	Institutes and faculties
Educational model	Practice-oriented, market-responsive; modern infrastructure	Vocational and public-mission oriented
External relations	Strong ties with private healthcare and design sectors	Cooperation with public institutions and local government
Funding	Tuition fees; private projects and partnerships	State budget; EU funds; competitive grants
Accreditation and evaluation	Programme accreditation by PKA; research evaluation depending on profile	Programme accreditation (PKA) and mandatory national evaluation; ministerial oversight
Quality assurance	Internal, flexible monitoring systems	Law-regulated QA with external supervision

Source: Own study.

Private university: As a contemporary non-public specialised institution, it prioritises flexible management, rapid responses to market signals, and close industry collaboration (notably in health and design). Decision-making is centralised—key strategic and operational choices are coordinated by the Chancellor and implemented by the Rectorate. This configuration supports agility and programme innovation, provided that internal QA remains robust and stakeholder feedback is systematically integrated (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

Public university: As a state vocational institution, it operates under statutory frameworks with strong academic participation in collegial bodies. Decisions are formally deliberated and aligned with regional development priorities and local labour-market needs. While such procedures enhance transparency and legitimacy, they can extend timelines for curricular reform and digital transformation, necessitating proactive project management and clear role delineation (The Law on Higher Education and Science, 2018/2024; PKA, 2019; OECD, 2024; GUS, 2025; Pisarska, Karpacz, and Pisarski, 2024).

The cases confirm the broader argument of this article: governance shapes the tempo and inclusiveness of decisions. Managerial concentration in the private HEI favours speed and adaptability; collegial structures in the public HEI favour legitimacy and institutional learning.

The most promising path is hybrid governance—combining evidence-based managerial tools (analytics, KPIs, project portfolios) with meaningful academic participation (senates, programme councils, stakeholder forums). In both settings, outcomes improve when decisions are data-informed, stakeholder-inclusive, and coupled with systematic monitoring and feedback loops (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024; Antonowicz, 2021; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

Limitations: As an illustrative two-case comparison, the analysis does not generalise to all Polish HEIs; it is intended to clarify mechanisms and trade-offs that can guide institutional self-assessment and policy design.

9. Challenges of University Governance in Poland

Governance in Polish universities faces several systemic and operational challenges that shape the effectiveness of decision-making, accountability, and innovation capacity. These challenges are linked to legal frameworks, demographic and economic trends, and cultural transformations within academia.

The *Law on Higher Education and Science* (2018/2024) defines governance structures but can also constrain flexibility. Frequent legislative amendments complicate long-term planning, particularly for public universities subject to detailed regulatory control. Aligning institutional autonomy with accountability remains a core challenge (PKA, 2019; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

Private universities face less bureaucratic restriction but must comply with accreditation and reporting standards that increasingly mirror public requirements, reducing their operational freedom (EUA, 2023).

Demographic decline reduces student enrollment, directly impacting revenues, especially for private universities reliant on tuition (GUS, 2025). Public universities, though state-funded, experience limited budget growth and rising operational costs.

To sustain stability, institutions diversify income through EU projects, research grants, international programs, and partnerships with business sectors (OECD, 2024; FRP/KRASP, 2024). Developing endowments and alumni networks is also gaining importance.

Digitalization represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Universities must invest in infrastructure, e-learning systems, and cybersecurity. While COVID-19 accelerated technological adoption, it also revealed skill gaps and uneven access across institutions (OECD, 2024).

Effective digital governance requires integrating IT management into decision-making and aligning it with teaching and research goals.

Growing global competition forces Polish universities to internationalize curricula, attract foreign students, and participate in global research networks. While public institutions benefit from reputation and resources, private ones often rely on niche specialization and partnership programs (Kwiek, 2021; EUA, 2023).

Barriers include language proficiency, administrative complexity, and limited international visibility. Building intercultural competence and joint programs remains essential for long-term competitiveness.

Many universities still exhibit hierarchical and conservative cultures, where innovation is perceived as risky. Decision-making may be formal rather than participatory, limiting creativity and staff engagement.

Cultural transformation—through leadership training, communication, and participatory structures—is vital for adaptive governance (Antonowicz, 2021; Leja, 2013).

Accreditation and evaluation systems (PKA, 2019; OECD, 2024) promote accountability but can overemphasize compliance. A balance must be found between procedural control and developmental evaluation focused on improvement and innovation.

10. Crisis Management in Higher Education

Crisis management has become a strategic component of university governance, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical instability in Europe. Crises affect institutional continuity, finances, reputation, and well-being, making resilience an essential dimension of decision-making (OECD, 2024; EUA, 2023).

A crisis is an unforeseen event disrupting normal operations—financial, reputational, technological, or health-related. Effective management requires anticipation, coordination, and communication. In universities, crises often involve

systemic complexity, multiple stakeholders, and social expectations (FRP/KRASP, 2024; Dwórznik and Opolski, 2021).

Universities implement crisis management through four main phases:

Prevention: risk assessment, contingency planning, training.

Preparedness: developing emergency protocols, communication plans, and IT resilience.

Response: immediate actions to ensure continuity (e.g., transition to remote learning).

Recovery: institutional learning and adaptation to prevent recurrence (OECD, 2024; EUA, 2023).

Public universities rely on formal procedures and state coordination, while private ones act more autonomously and flexibly. The key determinant of success lies in leadership readiness and effective communication.

Rectors and senior managers must act decisively yet transparently. During crises, leadership transitions from bureaucratic to adaptive modes, emphasizing empathy, trust, and collaboration (Antonowicz, 2021; OECD, 2024).

Resilient universities institutionalize learning from crises by updating governance frameworks and embedding flexibility in decision-making. Developing a “resilience culture” ensures that institutions not only survive but evolve (Dwórznik and Opolski, 2021).

Digital continuity planning—cybersecurity, data management, and infrastructure redundancy—is now integral to governance. Equally important are the psychological aspects: maintaining staff motivation, student well-being, and social cohesion during disruption (FRP/KRASP, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Sustainable recovery depends on combining technological preparedness with human-centered leadership.

Crises reveal institutional vulnerabilities but also drive modernization. Key lessons include:

- integrate crisis management into strategic planning;
- strengthen communication and trust networks;
- promote leadership development focused on adaptability;
- ensure digital and financial resilience;
- treat crisis recovery as an opportunity for reform and innovation (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

11. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of decision-making processes at public and private universities in Poland reveals both structural contrasts and converging tendencies. Public universities, governed by collegial and legally formalized systems, prioritize transparency, inclusivity, and procedural legitimacy.

However, their decision-making is often slow and encumbered by complex regulations. Private universities, by contrast, rely on managerial and centralized governance, enabling flexibility and rapid responses to market dynamics, though sometimes at the cost of participation and long-term stability (Leja, 2013; Sułkowski and Seliga, 2019; OECD, 2024).

Both models are undergoing transformation due to external pressures—demographic decline, financial constraints, and digitalization—and internal reform dynamics aimed at balancing autonomy with accountability. Increasingly, Polish universities evolve toward hybrid governance, combining the deliberative strengths of the collegial model with the efficiency and adaptability of managerial approaches (EUA, 2023; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

Decision-making emerges as a key determinant of institutional success, reflecting both leadership competence and organizational culture. Effective universities foster participatory communication, data-informed management, and shared strategic vision. These elements strengthen resilience, innovation capacity, and public trust—essential components of long-term competitiveness and social relevance (Antonowicz, 2021; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

Ultimately, decision-making is not merely a procedural mechanism but a strategic capability that defines the university's identity and developmental trajectory. Institutions that embed evidence-based governance, transparent leadership, and stakeholder integration are best positioned to navigate systemic challenges and capitalize on opportunities arising from internationalization and technological change.

12. Recommendations

Based on the comparative findings, several recommendations can guide the improvement of decision-making and governance across Polish higher education institutions:

12.1 Structural Recommendations

Balance between collegiality and management: Strengthen hybrid governance frameworks integrating participatory deliberation with executive efficiency.

Clarify competencies: Clearly define the roles of rectors, senates, and faculties to reduce procedural overlap and enhance accountability.

Enhance data-driven management: Develop institutional analytics and performance monitoring systems supporting evidence-based decision-making (OECD, 2024; EUA, 2023).

12.2 Strategic Recommendations

Foster leadership development: Invest in leadership training focusing on strategic foresight, crisis management, and adaptive governance (Antonowicz, 2021; Dwórzniak and Opolski, 2021).

Diversify funding: Encourage multi-source financing—EU grants, partnerships, alumni donations—to strengthen financial sustainability (FRP/KRASP, 2024).

Promote digital and international strategies: Embed digital transformation and internationalization into institutional missions to enhance competitiveness and innovation (OECD, 2024; Kwiek, 2021).

12.3 Cultural and Organizational Recommendations

Cultivate participatory culture: Encourage active engagement of academic staff and students in policy development and evaluation.

Support communication and transparency: Ensure open information flow between management and academic communities to build institutional trust.

Integrate quality assurance with strategic learning: Move from compliance-based evaluation toward formative assessment promoting improvement and innovation (PKA, 2019; EUA, 2023).

12.4 Crisis Preparedness

Institutionalize crisis management: Develop risk assessment, continuity, and recovery protocols as integral parts of strategic planning.

Strengthen resilience: Combine technological infrastructure with psychological and social support mechanisms for staff and students (OECD, 2024; FRP/KRASP, 2024).

These recommendations underline the importance of evolving governance systems that are not only efficient and transparent but also human-centered, inclusive, and future-oriented.

13. Final Reflections

Decision-making at Polish universities encapsulates the broader transformation of higher education in Europe—an ongoing shift from hierarchical, state-centered structures toward more flexible, networked, and learning-oriented systems. The capacity to make informed, participatory, and adaptive decisions determines institutional relevance in an era marked by uncertainty, digitalization, and global interdependence (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2024).

Public and private universities, despite different origins and missions, increasingly converge toward shared challenges: maintaining quality amid demographic decline, integrating technology, and responding to evolving societal expectations. These pressures demand governance models capable of both strategic agility and democratic accountability.

The comparative approach adopted in this study demonstrates that neither the collegial nor the managerial model alone can fully meet the demands of contemporary higher education. Sustainable governance requires hybridization—an ongoing synthesis of participation, efficiency, and innovation.

Ultimately, universities must view decision-making not as administrative routine but as a continuous process of organizational learning and transformation. In this sense, governance becomes a reflection of academic culture itself—a balance between tradition and change, autonomy and responsibility, reflection and action. Such an approach defines the essence of modern university leadership and its contribution to society's intellectual and economic development.

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