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Digital Transformation as a University Governance Strategy: International Lessons and Implications for Vietnam

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Abstract
Digital transformation has become an inevitable trend in higher education worldwide; however, in practice, it is often narrowly interpreted as technological investment or the digitization of existing processes. This paper approaches digital transformation as a university governance strategy, emphasizing that digital technologies can generate meaningful impact only when embedded within a clear developmental vision and accompanied by substantive governance reform. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and a synthesis of international scholarship, the paper clarifies the distinctions between digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation, and argues that digital transformation constitutes a comprehensive process of restructuring organizational arrangements, operational processes, and decision-making mechanisms in higher education. Through a comparative analysis of experiences from European, East Asian, and Anglo-Saxon models, the paper demonstrates that there is no single, universal pathway to digital transformation. Instead, national approaches vary according to institutional contexts, resource endowments, and underlying development philosophies. Building on this comparative perspective, the paper examines key characteristics of Vietnam's higher education system in the context of expanded institutional autonomy, persistent resource disparities, and growing quality pressures. It then proposes a set of policy and governance implications aimed at guiding digital transformation in Vietnamese higher education toward a more human-centered, sustainable, and socially responsible trajectory.

Keywords: development strategy, digital transformation, university governance, Vietnamese higher education.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, digital transformation has emerged as one of the central themes in global higher education. The rapid advancement of digital technologies, together with the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has compelled universities to reassess their operational models, modes of teaching and learning, and governance decision-making processes (Antonopoulou et al., 2023; Benavides et al., 2020). However, a growing body of research emphasizes that digital transformation in

higher education should not be equated with the mere adoption of digital tools or the digitization of existing processes. Rather, it constitutes a strategic change process that affects the entire organizational structure and academic culture of higher education institutions (Hashim et al., 2022; Marks & Al-Ali, 2020).

Recent systematic reviews indicate that one of the most common causes of failure in digital transformation initiatives lies in treating technology as an end in itself, rather than as a means to support broader university development strategies (Bisri et al., 2023; Mabotha & Ngcamu, 2026). Digital transformation generates meaningful value only when it is closely linked to governance reform, capacity-building for academic and managerial staff, data-informed decision-making, and mechanisms for ensuring educational quality (Carmo et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2025). As Smith (2023) argued, universities in the digital era are required not only to transform how they teach and learn but also to redefine their social mission and value proposition.

In Vietnam, digital transformation in higher education has been actively promoted in recent years; nevertheless, implementation practices reveal persistent limitations, particularly the absence of a strategic governance-oriented approach (Ca & Thai, 2024; Son, 2025). Domestic studies consistently point out that technological investment has not been adequately accompanied by innovations in governance models, the development of digital competencies among academic staff and administrators, or robust quality assurance mechanisms suited to digital environments (Doan, 2024; Hien, 2024). In this context, approaching digital transformation as a university governance strategy, informed by international experience, becomes an urgent requirement for shaping a sustainable development pathway for Vietnamese higher education.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The Concept of Digital Transformation in Higher Education

In higher education research, digital transformation is often conflated with related concepts such as digitization and digitalization. Digitization primarily refers to the conversion of data, documents, and processes from physical formats into digital ones, while digitalization emphasizes the use of digital technologies to enhance the efficiency of existing activities, such as academic administration or the delivery of online teaching and learning (Benavides et al., 2020; Fernández et al., 2023). At both levels, technology plays a supportive role, yet it does not fundamentally alter how higher education institutions operate.

By contrast, digital transformation is understood as a comprehensive and strategic change process in which digital technologies function as catalysts for organizational restructuring, process redesign, and the renewal of decision-making mechanisms in higher education (Marks & Al-Ali, 2020; Tang et al., 2025). A growing body of scholarship emphasizes that digital transformation cannot be separated from governance reform, as digital tools can generate meaningful impact only when they are embedded within new operational systems that are data-driven, transparent, and adaptive (Carmo et al., 2025; Mabotha & Ngcamu, 2026). Consequently, digital

transformation in higher education should be approached as an organizational–institutional process rather than merely a technological initiative.

Digital Transformation as a Governance Strategy

Approaching digital transformation as a governance strategy requires a close alignment between technology and the long-term developmental vision of the university. According to Hashim et al. (2022), digital transformation is sustainable only when it is embedded within a comprehensive strategy that clearly reflects the mission, core values, and development objectives of higher education institutions. This perspective necessitates adjustments in governance models toward appropriate decentralization, strengthened inter-unit coordination, and enhanced capacity for evidence-based decision-making.

In addition, numerous studies demonstrate that organizational culture and human capacity play a decisive role in the success of digital transformation initiatives (Bisri et al., 2023; Doan, 2024). Developing digital competencies among university leaders and academic staff should not be limited to technical skill training; rather, it involves a broader transformation in governance mindsets, including a willingness to utilize learning analytics and management data as foundations for policy formulation and quality improvement (Martin & Xie, 2022; Smith, 2023).

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach combining comparative analysis and literature synthesis to examine digital transformation as a governance strategy in higher education. The methodological core of the paper lies in the comparative analysis of international experiences, which enables the identification of diverse approaches to digital transformation across different institutional contexts and development models. Specifically, the study focuses on three representative settings—Europe, East Asia, and Anglo-Saxon countries—not with the aim of conducting an exhaustive country-by-country comparison, but rather to highlight variations in governance logics, the role of the state, degrees of institutional autonomy, and regulatory mechanisms in digital transformation processes (Anh et al., 2023).

In parallel, the study applied a selective review and synthesis of international and domestic academic literature on digital transformation, university governance, and higher education policy. The analyzed sources concentrate on core concepts, analytical frameworks, and conditions associated with the success or failure of digital transformation initiatives. This approach facilitates the construction of a strategic analytical framework, rather than treating digital transformation as a collection of isolated technological solutions (Ca & Thai, 2024).

Building on the comparative and theoretical synthesis, the paper subsequently engages in a contextualized discussion of Vietnamese higher education, with particular attention to institutional structures, levels of autonomy, resource disparities, and governance capacity. This approach enables a meaningful linkage between international theory and domestic practice, thereby generating policy and

governance implications that are both feasible and aligned with the current developmental conditions of Vietnamese higher education.

To enhance methodological transparency, the comparative analysis in this study is guided by three analytical dimensions: governance logic, the role of the state, and the drivers of digital transformation. Europe, East Asia, and Anglo-Saxon systems were selected because they represent three distinct governance approaches in higher education: quality assurance-oriented public governance, state-led developmental strategies, and market-driven innovation ecosystems. Rather than conducting a country-by-country comparison, the analysis focuses on identifying institutional patterns and policy orientations across these models. These comparative insights then provide the analytical foundation for deriving governance and policy implications relevant to the Vietnamese higher education context.

3. International Experiences in Digital Transformation and University Governance
Europe: Digital Transformation Anchored in Quality Assurance and Social Trust
In the European context, digital transformation in higher education is typically implemented at a cautious pace and subject to stringent quality control mechanisms. Existing studies indicate that many European countries do not regard digital transformation as a tool for rapidly expanding enrolment or scaling up provision. Instead, it is primarily understood as a means to enhance academic quality and to reinforce social trust in higher education systems (Benavides et al., 2020; Fernández et al., 2023). Consequently, digital transformation initiatives are closely aligned with established frameworks of standardization and accreditation.

A defining feature of the European model is the inclusion of online programs and digital learning resources within the same quality assurance and accreditation systems as traditional face-to-face education. This requires higher education institutions to demonstrate clearly defined learning outcomes, staff competencies, assessment methods, and quality assurance mechanisms that are appropriate to digital learning environments (Marks & Al-Ali, 2020). Such an approach helps mitigate the risk of "standards dilution" associated with technological adoption, while preserving the academic value and credibility of qualifications in an increasingly digitalized educational landscape.

Moreover, the regulatory role of the state is clearly manifested through legal frameworks governing data protection, privacy, and institutional accountability. Digital transformation, therefore, is not merely an internal matter for individual universities but forms part of a broader commitment involving the state, higher education institutions, and learners. A key implication of the European experience is that digital transformation can be sustainable only when embedded within a transparent public governance system, in which technological innovation does not undermine social trust in the public mission of the university (Hashim et al., 2022).

Institutional examples further illustrate how digital transformation can function as a governance strategy rather than merely a technological upgrade. For instance, the

University of Manchester integrated digital learning initiatives into its institutional quality assurance framework, ensuring that online and blended programs meet the same accreditation standards as traditional teaching. This governance-oriented approach has strengthened public trust in digital education while aligning technological innovation with institutional accountability and quality assurance mechanisms (Fernández et al., 2023; Hashim et al., 2022).

East Asia: Digital Transformation as a National Development Strategy

In contrast to the cautious approach observed in Europe, many East Asian countries conceptualize digital transformation in higher education as a national development strategy. Research indicates that the state plays a central role in investing in digital infrastructure, developing shared data platforms, and promoting the "smart university" model (Carmo et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2025). Within this framework, digital transformation is closely linked to broader objectives of enhancing national competitiveness, fostering innovation, and developing high-quality human capital.

A key feature of the East Asian model is the extensive use of Big Data and analytical systems to support university governance. Learning data, research data, and operational data are increasingly integrated to inform strategic decision-making, ranging from resource allocation to the personalization of learning pathways (Bisri et al., 2023). As Tang et al. (2025) argued, digital transformation in this context not only improves managerial efficiency but also facilitates more flexible educational models that are more closely aligned with the demands of the knowledge-based economy.

Nevertheless, the rapid pace of implementation and the high degree of reliance on digital technologies also generate significant challenges. Several studies warn of risks related to the infringement of learners' privacy, the intensification of surveillance, and the potential erosion of academic freedom when data becomes a central instrument of governance (Mabotha & Ngcamu, 2026). Consequently, even within the East Asian model, debates surrounding the balance between governance efficiency and core academic values have become increasingly prominent. This experience suggests that strong state investment must be accompanied by robust legal and ethical frameworks to ensure that digital transformation does not undermine the humanistic foundations of higher education.

Anglo-Saxon Systems: Digital Transformation in Contexts of Autonomy and Competition

In Anglo-Saxon countries—most notably the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—digital transformation in higher education unfolds within contexts characterized by high levels of institutional autonomy and intense competition among universities. Markets and educational technology (EdTech) companies play a significant role in driving innovation, ranging from online learning platforms and short-term credential programs to lifelong learning models (Martin & Xie, 2022; Smith, 2023). In these systems, digital transformation often originates from initiatives led by individual institutions or academic units, allowing for a high degree of flexibility.

The primary advantage of this model lies in its capacity for rapid innovation and adaptive responses to the diverse needs of learners. Higher education institutions are able to experiment with new educational models, leverage digital technologies to expand access, and generate additional revenue streams (Antonopoulou et al., 2023). However, the strong reliance on market mechanisms also heightens the risk of educational commodification. Several studies highlight rising tuition costs, widening access gaps across social groups, and increasing stratification among institutions within competitive digitalized environments (Smith, 2023).

As a result, debates over the regulatory role of the state and the social responsibility of universities remain salient even within Anglo-Saxon systems. This experience underscores that while market forces can serve as powerful drivers of innovation, digital transformation in higher education must still operate within normative boundaries designed to safeguard quality, equity, and the public mission of education.

A frequently cited example in Anglo-Saxon contexts is the case of Arizona State University, which has developed extensive partnerships with educational technology platforms such as edX to expand access to online learning and lifelong education. Within a governance environment characterized by high institutional autonomy and competitive pressures, the university has leveraged digital platforms to reach large numbers of learners while maintaining institutional control over curriculum design, learning outcomes, and student support systems. Studies note that this model illustrates how universities can collaborate with EdTech providers to scale innovation without relinquishing academic governance responsibilities (Martin & Xie, 2022; Smith, 2023). The experience of Arizona State University demonstrates that in Anglo-Saxon systems, digital transformation often emerges from institution-level initiatives and market-driven partnerships, supported by governance structures that safeguard academic quality and institutional accountability.

4. Discussion

Distinctive Features of Vietnamese Higher Education

Vietnamese higher education is currently operating within a context of profound transformation, in which the expansion of institutional autonomy has been identified as a key driver of reform (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022). Autonomy has enabled higher education institutions to exercise greater initiative in shaping development strategies, managing resources, and organizing educational provision (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022). Nevertheless, numerous studies indicate that governance capacity has not kept pace with the rapid expansion of autonomy, particularly in areas related to strategic planning and the effective use of digital technologies as governance instruments (Ca & Thai, 2024; Son, 2025).

In addition, disparities in resource endowments constitute a salient feature of Vietnam's higher education system. Large and well-established universities with stable revenue streams are better positioned to invest in digital infrastructure and technological human resources, whereas many local or specialized institutions face significant challenges in implementing digital transformation at a comprehensive

scale (Hien, 2024; Loan, 2024). In the absence of system-level regulatory and support mechanisms, digital transformation risks exacerbating inequalities among higher education institutions.

At the same time, pressures related to educational quality and social responsibility are intensifying. Learners and society increasingly demand not only access to digital technologies but also assurance regarding the value of qualifications, graduate employability, and the broader contributions of universities to sustainable development. In this context, digital transformation cannot be assessed solely in terms of technological modernization; rather, it must be evaluated based on its substantive impacts on educational quality and equity (Doan, 2024).

Digital Transformation: Choosing a Path Rather Than a Model

The analysis of international experiences demonstrates that there is no single "standard" model of digital transformation that can be directly transplanted into the Vietnamese context. Mechanical replication of European, East Asian, or Anglo-Saxon models entails significant risks related to institutional misalignment, resource constraints, and governance cultures (Anh et al., 2023; Fernández et al., 2023). Accordingly, the core issue is not the selection of a model but the identification of an appropriate developmental pathway for Vietnamese higher education in the digital era.

Such a pathway requires a flexible combination of key elements. First, lessons from the European experience underscore the importance of anchoring digital transformation in quality assurance, academic standards, and accountability to safeguard social trust in higher education systems (Marks & Al-Ali, 2020). Second, the East Asian experience highlights the indispensable role of strategic state investment, particularly in the development of shared digital infrastructure, integrated data systems, and open educational platforms, thereby helping to reduce disparities among institutions (Tang et al., 2025). Third, innovation dynamics driven by markets and the educational technology (EdTech) sector—characteristic of Anglo-Saxon systems—can create experimental spaces for flexible educational models that respond to the diverse needs of learners (Martin & Xie, 2022; Smith, 2023). However, such a combination can be effective only when situated within a clearly defined and appropriately regulated governance framework.

Governance Bottlenecks in Current Digital Transformation Efforts

One of the most significant bottlenecks in digital transformation within Vietnamese higher education is the absence of an overarching strategic framework. Many institutions have implemented fragmented technological projects that lack alignment with long-term development visions and governance reforms, resulting in limited overall impact (Chi et al., 2023; Son, 2025). This situation contributes to the perception of digital transformation as a short-term initiative rather than a sustained process of institutional restructuring.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of data and management processes undermines the capacity for evidence-based decision-making. Educational, research, and administrative data often reside in separate systems, with limited integration and underutilization for strategic governance purposes (Carmo et al., 2025). Finally, constraints in the digital competencies of university leaders and academic staff remain a major barrier. Digital transformation demands not only technological skills but also governance capabilities, data-oriented thinking, and a willingness to embrace organizational change (Bisri et al., 2023; Doan, 2024). Without addressing these interconnected bottlenecks, digital transformation is unlikely to become a substantive driver of reform in Vietnamese higher education.

5. Policy and Governance Implications

Based on the analysis of international experiences and the specific context of Vietnamese higher education, several important implications can be drawn for policymaking and the governance of digital transformation. At the state level, it is necessary to shift from an approach focused on promoting isolated technological projects toward the development of a systemic strategic framework for digital transformation in higher education. Numerous studies emphasize that the core role of the state does not lie in selecting technologies on behalf of universities, but rather in establishing the "rules of the game" through shared standards related to quality, data governance, security, and accountability (Hashim et al., 2022; Marks & Al-Ali, 2020). Such frameworks are a necessary condition to ensure that technological innovation does not erode academic values or social trust in higher education.

In addition, international experience demonstrates that strategic state investment remains pivotal, particularly in the development of shared digital infrastructure and interoperable data systems. Given the substantial resource disparities among higher education institutions in Vietnam, national or inter-regional platforms for digital learning resources, digital libraries, and higher education data systems can contribute to reducing inequality and enhancing the efficiency of resource utilization (Anh et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2025). Such investment should be understood not merely in technical terms, but as an investment in quality and equity in access to knowledge.

At the institutional level, digital transformation should be clearly defined as a long-term development strategy, closely aligned with each university's vision and governance model. Both international and domestic studies indicate that digital transformation initiatives generate tangible benefits only when they are integrated into governance reform, process reengineering, and the cultivation of data-informed organizational cultures (Bisri et al., 2023; Carmo et al., 2025). This requires universities to move beyond fragmented approaches and instead design integrated information systems that support evidence-based decision-making. Building on the comparative analysis, a phased strategic pathway may help guide digital transformation in Vietnamese higher education.

First, at the system level, priority should be given to establishing a coherent governance framework for digital transformation, including national standards for

data governance, quality assurance in digital learning, and ethical guidelines for the use of educational technologies. Such a framework would provide clear institutional incentives while safeguarding academic standards and social trust. Second, strategic state investment should focus on shared digital infrastructure, including interoperable higher education data systems, national digital libraries, and open educational resource platforms. These initiatives can reduce disparities among institutions and improve access to high-quality learning resources across the system. Third, at the institutional level, universities should integrate digital transformation into long-term development strategies, emphasizing governance reform, data-informed decision-making, and the continuous development of digital competencies among academic leaders and faculty members.

Finally, the development of human capacity must be regarded as a central pillar of digital transformation. Digital transformation cannot succeed if university leaders and academic staff lack digital competencies and governance mindsets appropriate to digital environments (Doan, 2024; Hien, 2024). Training and professional development in digital competencies should therefore aim not only to enhance technological skills but also to foster strategic thinking, openness to innovation, and a strong sense of responsibility toward the social mission of higher education.

6. Conclusion

This paper has approached digital transformation in higher education not as a collection of technological solutions but as a comprehensive governance strategy closely linked to the choice of developmental pathways for university systems in the digital era. The analysis of theoretical frameworks and international experiences demonstrates that digital transformation generates meaningful value only when embedded within a clear strategic vision, accompanied by governance reform, quality assurance, and the development of human capacity.

Experiences from European, East Asian, and Anglo-Saxon models indicate that there is no single, universal template for digital transformation in higher education. While European systems emphasize standards, accreditation, and social trust, East Asian contexts conceptualize digital transformation as a national development strategy supported by strong state investment, and Anglo-Saxon systems rely more heavily on market dynamics and institutional autonomy to drive innovation. These differences confirm that digital transformation cannot be mechanically replicated but must be flexibly adapted to the institutional context and resource conditions of each country.

In Vietnam, digital transformation in higher education is unfolding amid expanded institutional autonomy, persistent resource disparities, and growing pressures related to quality and social responsibility. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that the most significant challenges do not stem from technological shortages, but rather from limitations in strategic thinking, governance capacity, and fragmentation within operational systems. Digital transformation should therefore be positioned as an opportunity for institutional restructuring, rather than as a short-term modernization initiative.

In sum, digital transformation becomes truly meaningful only when technology is placed in its proper role—as a tool serving a human-centered, sustainable, and socially responsible educational vision. This is not merely a technical challenge, but fundamentally a governance issue involving strategic choices about the future development of Vietnamese higher education.

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