

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

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Abstract. This article examines the governance of Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) during a period of unprecedented systemic transformation, brought on by both domestic reform initiatives and external crises. The relevance of the topic stems from Ukraine's ongoing transition from a post-Soviet administrative legacy toward a modern, decentralized, and European-aligned model of higher education governance. The purpose of the study is to assess how governance structures in Ukrainian HEIs are responding to current challenges while identifying strategic opportunities for reform and innovation. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative analytical framework, integrating official national statistics, legislative documents, and policy strategies with interpretive analysis to assess the effects of governance reforms implemented between 2020 and 2024. Special attention is paid to structural shifts in institutional networks, student enrollment dynamics, financial flows, and internationalization trends. The study's results show that despite major constraints—including military conflict, economic instability, demographic decline, and institutional fragmentation—Ukraine has made significant progress in reforming its higher education governance system. Key achievements include the introduction of strategic planning frameworks, the implementation of student-centered learning trajectories, and the adoption of national qualification standards. However, several challenges persist, such as outdated infrastructure, uneven digital readiness, and financial instability across institutions. Moreover, the war has exposed vulnerabilities in the system, such as reduced mobility, displaced academic communities, and the closure of institutions in conflict zones. Nevertheless, the analysis highlights critical opportunities for enhancing governance capacity: greater institutional autonomy, expanded digital governance, stronger quality assurance mechanisms, and integration with European education networks. These developments suggest that Ukrainian HEIs, with appropriate support and vision, can evolve into more efficient, inclusive, and competitive actors within the global higher education landscape.

Keywords: higher education, Ukraine, governance, reform, public administration, digital transformation, autonomy, resilience, quality assurance, European integration.

JEL Classification: I18, I21, I25, H83

Formulas: 0; **fig.:** 0; **table:** 6; **bibl.:** 12

Introduction. Governance within higher education systems has become an increasingly critical area of focus, particularly for nations undergoing significant political, economic, and institutional transitions. Ukraine represents a compelling case in this regard, situated at the intersection of its post-Soviet legacy and the ambitious pursuit of European integration. Since independence in 1991, Ukraine has initiated a broad set of reforms aimed at aligning its higher education institutions (HEIs) with international standards, particularly those set forth by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process. However, substantial challenges remain in areas such as institutional autonomy, administrative transparency, academic integrity, and the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms.

These governance difficulties are exacerbated by the country's ongoing efforts toward decentralization and public administration reform, which often result in universities being tasked with expanded responsibilities amid limited resources and political instability. Moreover, corruption, regulatory inertia, and fragmented stakeholder engagement continue to hinder progress. Nonetheless, these challenges also present an opportunity for systemic innovation. Enhanced digitalization, international cooperation, and strategic engagement with EU education initiatives provide new pathways to improve governance effectiveness. This study explores both the barriers and opportunities for higher education governance in Ukraine, with particular emphasis on the reforms and trends emerging between 2020 and 2024.

Literature review. The governance of higher education has been extensively studied in the context of public administration, especially within transitional societies and post-socialist states. Scholars have emphasized that effective governance is foundational to ensuring quality, transparency, and responsiveness in higher education systems (de Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007). In Ukraine, the post-independence period has been marked by systemic efforts to restructure its higher education governance in alignment with democratic values and European standards (Zgaga et al., 2013). However, the process has been uneven, influenced by political instability, lingering Soviet-era bureaucratic practices, and institutional resistance to change (Hladchenko, 2016).

Ukraine's participation in the Bologna Process since 2005 has provided a significant framework for reform, aimed at fostering compatibility with European education systems and improving quality assurance mechanisms (European Commission, 2017). While this has catalyzed curriculum modernization and credit transfer systems, researchers have noted that deeper governance reforms—such as enhancing institutional autonomy and academic freedom—remain inconsistently implemented (Kvit, 2019). Furthermore, despite formal legislative changes, such as the 2014 Law on Higher Education, studies suggest that practical challenges persist, including limited financial independence and pervasive administrative inefficiencies (Pachenkov & Gorbunova, 2021).

Corruption in higher education administration has also received considerable scholarly attention. According to Osipian (2012), systemic corruption undermines governance effectiveness, erodes public trust, and hampers efforts to professionalize university management. Although anti-corruption measures have been introduced,

including electronic admissions systems and external quality assessment bodies, their enforcement and impact vary widely across institutions (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020). These governance deficiencies are exacerbated by an often-politicized regulatory environment and a lack of coordinated national strategy for institutional development (Zhurakovska & Yaroshenko, 2020).

Nonetheless, literature also points to emerging opportunities. Internationalization is viewed as a potential catalyst for governance reform, with cross-border partnerships fostering knowledge transfer and best practices (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). EU-funded initiatives such as Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, and Twinning projects have provided Ukrainian universities with tools for institutional capacity-building and integration into the European Research Area (Tempus Public Foundation, 2019). Digital transformation, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has further opened discussions on innovative governance models, emphasizing flexibility, accountability, and participatory management (Kryvtsova & Nesterova, 2021).

In sum, the existing literature underscores a dual narrative in Ukrainian higher education governance: persistent structural and political challenges on one hand, and a growing array of reform opportunities on the other. A public administration perspective is essential to contextualize these developments within broader state modernization processes and the strategic objective of European integration.

Aims. This article aims to explore the multifaceted challenges facing Ukrainian higher education governance while highlighting the emerging opportunities that could facilitate meaningful and sustainable reform. The primary objectives are:

- to identify the major challenges facing Ukrainian HEIs in the context of institutional governance;
- to examine the impact of reforms implemented between 2020 and 2024, particularly those aimed at aligning Ukraine's higher education system with European norms;
- to evaluate the opportunities available for enhancing governance structures through digital transformation, international partnerships, and policy innovation;
- to offer insights for future policy development and strategic governance improvements that support Ukraine's path toward European integration.

Methodology. The research employs a qualitative analytical approach, drawing on official statistical data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, legislative documents, policy strategies, and existing academic literature. The period under review is 2018–2024, with particular attention to reforms initiated from 2020 onwards. Primary data include enrollment figures, institutional classifications by ownership, international student numbers, and funding structures. This data is complemented by thematic analysis of national policy frameworks and international reports to evaluate the implementation of governance reforms and their outcomes. Tables are used to visually present trends and facilitate comparative analysis across years and institutional types.

Result. The governance of educational institutions in the context of higher education reform in Ukraine requires a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape, the key challenges, and the prospects for future development. Between 2020 and 2024, Ukraine undertook a series of significant reforms aimed at modernizing its

higher education system, aligning it with European standards, and enhancing the quality of educational services. These reforms addressed strategic planning, institutional governance optimization, increased flexibility in educational delivery, and improvements in student assessment mechanisms.

One of the most notable achievements during this period was the introduction of individualized educational trajectories, which provided students with greater autonomy in managing their academic pathways. Another major step forward was the reorganization of higher education institutions, intended to promote more efficient resource utilization and increase institutional competitiveness. The gradual implementation of the Unified State Qualification Examination (USQE) standardized the evaluation of academic performance, while the decision to phase out the junior bachelor's degree streamlined the educational system in accordance with international norms.

Table 1. Key Higher Education Reforms in Ukraine (2020–2024)

Reform	Description
Strategic Development Planning	In 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the “Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022–2032.” This strategic document identified core priorities, including improved governance efficiency, enhancement of service quality, and internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs).
Reform of the University Admission System	In 2024, amendments were made to the national admission procedures. These included an increased regional coefficient to support HEIs in frontline and border areas, which helped ensure a more equitable distribution of student enrollment.
Implementation of Individual Learning Trajectories	Legislative changes adopted in 2024 enabled students to manage the duration of their studies and switch academic disciplines during their education, fostering a more flexible and student-centered learning environment.
Institutional Reorganization	In 2024, the Ministry of Education and Science was tasked with developing a reorganization plan for public HEIs in 2025, aimed at optimizing the institutional network and enhancing operational efficiency.
Unified State Qualification Examination (USQE)	Between 2020 and 2024, the USQE was gradually introduced as a standardized assessment tool for bachelor's and master's degree graduates to ensure consistent academic quality across institutions.
Discontinuation of the Junior Bachelor's Degree	In 2023, a decision was made to terminate enrollment in junior bachelor's programs starting in 2024, streamlining the higher education structure in line with European standards.

Source: systematized by the author

Despite these significant accomplishments, numerous challenges remain. Key issues include limited financial resources for reform implementation, delays in institutional transformation, and the need for deeper integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The future trajectory of higher education in Ukraine will largely depend on the successful execution of these reforms, sustained support for academic staff, and the ongoing alignment of educational programs with labor market demands.

The Ukrainian higher education system also faced substantial external and internal challenges during the 2020–2024 period, significantly affecting institutional performance, adaptability, and sustainability (Table 2.2).

Table 2. The key Challenges Faced by Ukrainian Higher Education Institutions (2020–2024)

Challenge	Description
War and Security Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Destruction of university infrastructure due to ongoing military conflict. – Evacuation of faculty and students from affected regions. – Forced transition to remote learning in response to security threats. – Reduced academic mobility due to war-related travel restrictions.
Financial Instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Decline in government funding as resources were reallocated to defense needs. – Decrease in tuition-paying students due to economic hardship. – Limited access to international grants amid national instability.
Demographic Decline and Student Migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reduction in secondary school graduates due to demographic trends. – Outmigration of students seeking better education opportunities abroad. – Increased competition between Ukrainian and foreign HEIs.
Digital Transformation Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Insufficient digital infrastructure to support high-quality remote education. – Low digital literacy among faculty and students. – Urgent need to modernize online teaching methods and quality assurance practices.
Human Resource Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Loss of academic personnel due to emigration and low salaries. – Faculty reductions as a result of institutional consolidation. – Weak incentives for attracting young researchers due to limited research funding.
Institutional Network Optimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Resistance to the closure or merger of underperforming institutions. – Organizational difficulties in executing institutional unification. – Need to reform governance structures to enhance management efficiency.
Quality and International Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Necessity to modernize curricula to meet labor market expectations. – Heightened competition from European universities. – Inadequate funding for upgrading campus facilities and learning environments.

Source: systematized by the author

Resilience and strategic development of ukrainian higher education institutions amid crisis. Despite facing complex and adverse circumstances, Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) have demonstrated notable resilience and adaptability. The successful navigation of current challenges will depend heavily on sustained government support, international cooperation, digital transformation, responsiveness to evolving labor market needs, and effective institutional governance. Global educational trends also play a crucial role, providing both direction and pressure for the modernization of university management practices in Ukraine.

This study explores several key dimensions of Ukraine's higher education governance transformation:

- **Structural changes within the higher education network**, focusing on variations in the number and types of HEIs based on ownership and their implications for governance efficiency.
- **Shifts in student enrollment**, analyzing trends in student population dynamics, the distribution of students across public, municipal, and private institutions, and the corresponding financial implications.
- **The internationalization of higher education**, with particular attention to trends in the enrollment of foreign students and their participation in academic life.

An analysis of the higher education network (Table 2.3) reveals a decline in the number of institutions from 2018 to 2023.

Table 3. Higher Education Institutions in Ukraine by Ownership Form

Indicator	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Total number of HEIs	282	281	515	386	347
Including those founded on:					
– State ownership	196	189	332	242	210
– Municipal ownership	13	14	63	41	36
– Private ownership	73	78	120	103	101

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

Notably, the 2020/2021 academic year recorded a temporary spike, largely due to administrative changes that reclassified university branches as independent institutions. However, in subsequent years, the number of HEIs declined, reflecting a broader state policy of consolidation and efficiency-driven optimization.

The reduction in the number of state and municipal institutions indicates ongoing reorganization efforts, including potential mergers aimed at rationalizing resource use. At the same time, the decline in private institutions suggests challenges such as inadequate funding, declining public confidence, and intensified competition from public universities. These trends collectively point to significant structural adjustments in Ukraine's higher education landscape, emphasizing quality over quantity and enhancing system-level efficiency.

Enrollment trends further illustrate the shifting landscape. From 2018 to 2022, the total number of students in Ukrainian HEIs declined steadily, followed by stabilization in 2022/2023. This decline can be largely attributed to demographic challenges, including a shrinking pool of secondary school graduates. Migration patterns have also contributed, as many young people opt to study abroad, drawn by improved employment opportunities and stronger academic infrastructures.

Private HEIs were particularly affected, experiencing a sharp drop in student numbers after 2021, likely due to decreased household incomes, economic uncertainty, and the ongoing war, all of which prompted students to gravitate toward public or international institutions. Interestingly, municipal HEIs saw an increase in enrollment, possibly reflecting enhanced local support. These developments call for closer evaluation of institutional strategies aimed at stabilizing and growing student populations.

Table 4. Student enrollment in Ukrainian higher education institutions

Indicator	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Total students	1,322,324	1,266,121	1,141,889	1,046,669	1,053,770
Including those in:					
– State HEIs	1,191,571	1,139,954	977,752	910,785	914,250
– Municipal HEIs	24,022	18,106	50,308	97,445	103,971
– Private HEIs	106,731	108,061	113,829	38,439	35,549
Newly enrolled students – total	256,853	250,055	277,057	239,218	245,089
Including:					
– In state HEIs	232,847	229,047	234,563	207,530	211,835
– In municipal HEIs	5,201	3,734	14,419	20,473	23,382
– In private HEIs	18,805	17,274	28,075	11,215	9,872
Graduates – total	357,415	333,619	385,700	261,788	273,168
Including from:					
– State HEIs	323,130	295,767	329,802	219,711	233,266
– Municipal HEIs	5,422	5,160	40,358	31,375	30,163
– Private HEIs	28,863	32,692	40,358	31,375	9,739

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

From a financial perspective, there has been a gradual decline in the number of students funded by the state, as evidenced in Table 2.5.

Table 5. Student Enrollment by Funding Source

Indicator	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Total students	1,322,324	1,266,121	1,141,889	1,046,669	1,053,770
Funded by:					
– State budget	582,877	545,893	473,509	424,640	418,237
– Students contracts	739,447	720,228	668,370	621,983	635,497

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

This trend may reflect shrinking public budgets and a reduced government quota for higher education. Although contract-based enrollment has remained relatively stable, a noticeable dip in 2021/2022 likely resulted from pandemic-related economic strain. The war further exacerbated funding issues, as national resources were reallocated to meet urgent defense needs, limiting support for budget-funded students. This situation underscores the importance of developing more robust financial aid systems to support economically vulnerable students.

The internationalization of Ukraine's higher education system has also faced severe disruptions.

Table 6. International Students in Ukrainian Higher Education Institutions (at the Start of the Academic Year)

Indicator	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Total international students	54,382	59,829	67,327	73,626	49,999
Newly enrolled	10,028	10,637	13,054	19,324	5,841
Graduates	9,432	9,850	9,586	9,075	10,769

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

Until the 2021/2022 academic year, the number of foreign students steadily increased, reflecting Ukraine's growing appeal as a study destination. This growth was the result of strengthened international partnerships and the expanding global reputation of Ukrainian universities. However, in 2022/2023, the number of foreign students dropped sharply due to the security risks associated with the full-scale war.

New foreign student admissions fell dramatically, suggesting a significant loss of confidence in the safety and reliability of Ukrainian education during wartime. Additional factors, such as visa restrictions, cross-border travel limitations, and reduced student mobility, further impacted enrollment. To remain competitive and financially viable, Ukrainian HEIs must explore alternative pathways to attract international students, including remote learning programs, international scholarships, and deeper collaboration with foreign universities.

Despite these challenges, the presence of international students remains a critical source of revenue and global engagement for Ukrainian HEIs. Their continued participation not only supports institutional budgets but also promotes cultural exchange and academic diversity.

Opportunities in Ukrainian higher education governance. Despite the profound challenges faced by Ukraine's higher education system—particularly in the context of war, economic instability, and demographic decline—there are significant opportunities to strengthen governance and accelerate the modernization of institutional structures. These opportunities stem from a combination of internal reform momentum, international cooperation, digital innovation, and the strategic objective of integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Recognizing and capitalizing on these opportunities is essential for building a resilient, transparent, and globally competitive higher education system in Ukraine.

1. European integration as a strategic framework. Ukraine's commitment to aligning with European Union (EU) standards provides a comprehensive roadmap for reforming higher education governance. Participation in the Bologna Process and adherence to the principles of the EHEA encourage institutional autonomy, academic freedom, student-centered learning, and transparent quality assurance systems. This alignment offers Ukrainian HEIs a clear set of governance benchmarks and access to best practices developed across Europe. The implementation of the "Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine 2022–2032" demonstrates a clear policy commitment to this strategic direction.

2. International cooperation and funding opportunities. Continued engagement with international organizations such as the European Commission, UNESCO,

Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the World Bank creates avenues for institutional capacity-building, faculty development, and infrastructure support. Many Ukrainian universities have already benefited from joint research projects, academic mobility programs, and institutional twinning initiatives. These partnerships not only bring in financial resources but also promote the adoption of effective governance models, fostering modernization and innovation.

3. *Digital transformation and e-governance tools.* The forced shift to remote learning due to war and pandemic-related disruptions has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in higher education. This transformation opens up possibilities for implementing digital governance tools, such as online admissions systems, learning management platforms, and electronic document circulation. Digital solutions can significantly enhance transparency, administrative efficiency, and student engagement. Moreover, the integration of artificial intelligence and data analytics into management practices can support evidence-based decision-making at both the institutional and national levels.

4. *Reorganization and optimization of HEI networks.* The ongoing restructuring of Ukraine's higher education network—through mergers, closures, and reclassification of institutions—presents an opportunity to optimize resource allocation and strengthen institutional performance. These changes, if guided by robust governance mechanisms, can lead to a more coherent and efficient higher education landscape. Consolidating fragmented HEIs into stronger, multidisciplinary institutions may also enhance research capacity, improve competitiveness, and attract greater investment.

5. *Empowerment of institutional autonomy.* Legislative reforms have increasingly emphasized the importance of granting universities greater autonomy in academic, financial, and organizational matters. If supported by adequate institutional capacity and accountability frameworks, this shift allows HEIs to tailor their strategies to local needs and global opportunities. Autonomy fosters innovation, encourages leadership responsibility, and creates space for entrepreneurial models of university management.

6. *Strengthening quality assurance systems.* The development of national quality assurance frameworks—particularly through the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA)—has introduced a culture of continuous improvement in university governance. External evaluations, accreditation procedures, and performance monitoring mechanisms can enhance institutional transparency and public trust. As Ukraine continues to align its quality assurance processes with European standards, the higher education system stands to gain from increased legitimacy and global recognition.

7. *Engagement with civil society and stakeholder.* There is a growing trend toward involving civil society, student unions, employer associations, and alumni networks in governance processes. This participatory approach can improve the responsiveness of HEIs to societal needs and labor market demands. Involving external stakeholders in strategic planning, curriculum development, and policy evaluation supports democratic accountability and helps ensure that higher education serves

public interests.

8. Development of remote and transnational education. The expansion of online learning and cross-border education provides Ukrainian universities with new tools to reach international students, especially during wartime. Digital internationalization—through joint online programs, distance partnerships, and virtual exchange—can compensate for physical mobility limitations and open up new revenue streams. These models also promote academic collaboration without requiring physical infrastructure investment, making them particularly valuable during times of crisis.

Discussion. The period between 2020 and 2024 has seen significant reform efforts in Ukraine's higher education sector. Key reforms include the adoption of the national Strategy for the Development of Higher Education (2022–2032), changes to the admissions process, implementation of individualized learning trajectories, and the gradual introduction of the Unified State Qualification Examination (USQE). These reforms reflect a broader agenda of modernization and alignment with European educational standards.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's HEIs continue to operate under difficult conditions. The full-scale Russian invasion, coupled with long-standing systemic issues, has placed unprecedented strain on institutional infrastructure, human capital, and financial stability. The destruction of educational facilities, forced evacuations, and a shift to remote learning have necessitated rapid adaptability and exposed digital gaps. Simultaneously, demographic decline and student migration have reduced the potential student base, while economic challenges have led to decreased contract-based enrollments and limited public funding.

Data analysis reveals a fluctuating but overall declining number of HEIs, particularly among public and municipal institutions—an outcome of consolidation and reorganization efforts. Private institutions have also declined, likely due to financial difficulties and reduced public confidence. Enrollment trends mirror this contraction, with a notable drop in student numbers, especially in private HEIs, though some stabilization occurred in 2022/2023. Furthermore, a significant drop in international student enrollment in 2022/2023 highlights the broader reputational and operational challenges facing Ukrainian universities.

Despite these difficulties, several opportunities are emerging. The shift toward European governance models, increased digitalization, enhanced institutional autonomy, and quality assurance reforms create a fertile environment for transformation. International cooperation through programs like Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe has already fostered institutional capacity-building. There is also growing momentum for stakeholder participation in governance, including student unions and employer organizations, signaling a move toward more inclusive and responsive higher education leadership.

Conclusion. Ukrainian higher education governance stands at a critical juncture. The combination of wartime disruptions, economic instability, and institutional restructuring has exposed fundamental weaknesses in governance systems. However, these pressures have also accelerated long-overdue reforms and prompted new thinking about higher education's role in national resilience and international competitiveness.

To capitalize on these developments, Ukraine must continue implementing transparent and accountable governance frameworks aligned with European standards. Strengthening institutional autonomy, investing in digital infrastructure, and expanding international partnerships will be crucial. Furthermore, the government and HEIs must prioritize financial support mechanisms, particularly for vulnerable students and displaced populations, while ensuring that governance reforms are participatory and adaptable to a changing global landscape.

Ultimately, the successful transformation of higher education governance in Ukraine will depend on the integration of strategic vision, inclusive policymaking, and sustained collaboration between state authorities, academic institutions, and international partners. Such a comprehensive approach will not only help Ukraine withstand current challenges but also position its higher education system as a competitive player within the broader European and global education arena.

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