

Digital Transformation as Institutional Branding: A Multi-level Marketing Governance Analysis of Romanian Higher Education Policy

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Abstract

Higher education institutions across Europe increasingly present digital transformation as a marker of strategic modernity, yet the gap between this communicated image and the underlying governance reality remains underexplored. Romanian higher education provides a revealing setting in which to examine this gap, given the convergence of supranational funding mandates, ambitious national legislation, formalized quality assurance standards, and resource-dependent universities operating under intense external pressure. Combining institutional theory with marketing governance frameworks, the European Union, the Romanian Government, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), and individual universities are positioned as distinct actors whose framing choices, governance instruments, and accountability logics jointly determine the credibility of digital transformation claims. Strategic policies, funding frameworks, and legislative instruments issued between 2020 and 2026 are examined through qualitative documentary analysis structured around actor-specific coding categories. Supranational and governmental actors are found to construct an assertive digitalization narrative reinforced by conditional financing and regulatory reform, while universities adopt a markedly more pragmatic stance, channeling resources toward infrastructure visibility rather than pedagogical depth. The resulting asymmetry exposes the system to means–ends decoupling, with digital investment decisions only loosely tied to demonstrable improvements in teaching and learning. By tracing how institutional isomorphism interacts with strategic communication across governance levels, new insight is offered into the marketing governance dynamics underlying higher education digitalization in Romania.

Keywords: Digital transformation, higher education marketing, institutional isomorphism, means–ends decoupling, marketing governance, Romania.

JEL classification: M31, I23, O33, H52.

Introduction

The digital transformation of higher education has become a defining strategic challenge for universities worldwide, reframing institutional positioning, stakeholder communication, and the governance of educational value delivery. Digital technologies are now part of teaching methods, student assessment, institutional management, research support, and the broader capacity of universities to compete for students, faculty, and funding in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Historically, technology was never a primary focus in university strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic changed all of this almost overnight. What had been a slow, steady move toward digital tools suddenly became an urgent priority for the entire system. (Benavides et al., 2020).

As the immediate crisis passed, it became clear that digitalization was far more than a short-term problem to solve. It started raising deeper questions about how universities serve their students, what they stand for, and where they fit within the broader higher education world, both nationally and across Europe. From a marketing governance perspective, this shift

is particularly significant: it changes the nature of the educational product, the channels through which institutions deliver value, and the metrics by which institutional performance is evaluated and communicated to stakeholders. The European Union has articulated a normative framework to guide this transition, with the *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027* defining digital education as a structural priority and a precondition for building high-quality, inclusive, and accessible educational ecosystems capable of responding to the economic and social demands of the digital age (European Commission, 2020). Global policy actors such as the OECD similarly emphasize that while digital technologies hold considerable potential to improve educational quality, equity, and efficiency, these outcomes depend strongly on robust institutional governance and advanced policy capacity (OECD, 2023).

Romania offers a particularly case study within this European context. The national higher education system is navigating structural reforms while confronting persistent resource constraints and intense external pressure to modernize. Legislative milestones, including the adoption of Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 (Romanian Parliament, 2023) and the large-scale investments channeled through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2021), reflect a decisive, top-down attempt to reposition Romanian universities as digitally capable, internationally competitive institutions. This paper examines how the multi-level governance of digital transformation operates within this national context, with a focus on how institutional attitudes shape both the strategic communication of reform and the risk of policy decoupling.

However, the actual outcomes of these reforms depend critically on how different institutional actors interpret, implement, and communicate them. Their impact is mediated by the attitudes, absorptive capacities, and strategic orientations of supranational bodies, national authorities, quality assurance agencies, and individual universities. This paper addresses the following research question: *In what ways do major institutional actors construct and communicate the digital transformation of university educational policies, which governance instruments do they rely on, and how does this combination of institutional attitudes influence the risk of means–ends decoupling?* The analysis adopts a marketing governance lens, treating institutional communication of digital strategy as a form of institutional branding and stakeholder positioning, and examining whether the marketed image of digital transformation is substantiated by genuine changes in educational practice.

1. Literature Review

The academic literature on higher education digitalization has evolved considerably over the past decade, shifting from narrow concerns about hardware provision and e-learning platforms to broader questions about institutional governance, organizational change, and strategic positioning. This section reviews the key theoretical frameworks that inform the present analysis: the distinction between digitization and digital transformation, institutional isomorphism, means–ends decoupling, and the specific vulnerabilities of the Romanian higher education system.

1.1. From Digitization to Digital Transformation

Early scholarship on technology integration in universities characterized the process as a predominantly technical, linear progression. Tømte et al. (2019) identify an initial phase of *digitization*, defined as the literal conversion of analogue materials to digital formats — scanning library archives, transitioning from paper to electronic records, or migrating administrative processes online. A subsequent phase of *digitalization* involves the use of these digital assets to enhance existing organizational processes without fundamentally altering the underlying educational model or institutional structure (Tømte et al., 2019).

By contrast, *digital transformation* is a broader, structural process that involves developing new educational services, redesigning curriculum and assessment, reconfiguring data governance, and achieving significant shifts in organizational culture and strategic positioning (Benavides et al., 2020). From a marketing perspective, this distinction is consequential: digitization is an improvement in operational efficiency, while digital transformation changes the institution's value proposition, its student experience design, and its competitive positioning. Research consistently shows that many universities conflate these concepts, treating the procurement of equipment as equivalent to deep cultural and pedagogical change — a tendency that has significant implications for institutional branding and the credibility of communicated marketing claims (Basavaraja et al., 2024; Tømte et al., 2019).

This gap between the marketed image of digital transformation and its substantive institutional reality is a central concern of the present paper. When universities communicate ambitious digital strategies to prospective students, funding bodies, and ranking agencies, the authenticity and consistency of those communications, measured against actual changes in teaching and learning, become a matter of both institutional integrity and marketing governance (Kotler et al., 2021).

1.2. Institutional Isomorphism and Higher Education Marketing

A foundational theoretical framework for understanding organizational convergence in higher education is DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) neo-institutional theory of *institutional isomorphism*. Their argument is that organizations embedded in structured organizational fields — of which higher education is a paradigmatic example — are driven less by pure efficiency considerations and more by the need to appear legitimate, attract resources, and obtain approval from powerful stakeholders. The resulting tendency for organizations to become structurally similar is what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term institutional isomorphism, which operates through three overlapping mechanisms.

First, *coercive isomorphism* derives from formal and informal pressures exerted by powerful actors upon which an organization is financially or legally dependent (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In contemporary European higher education, coercive pressures flow primarily from supranational and national funding authorities. The NextGenerationEU programme, for instance, conditions access to recovery funds on the adoption of specific digital strategies — institutional digitalization plans, interoperable data systems, expanded online and blended learning offerings, and staff training in digital pedagogy (European Commission, 2026). Second, *mimetic isomorphism* occurs when organizations respond to uncertainty — such as the disruption caused by a global pandemic or the competitive pressure generated by international university rankings — by imitating the structures and practices of peer institutions perceived as more successful or legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Third, *normative isomorphism* is driven by professionalization, academic networks, and quality assurance bodies that define and enforce the legitimate standards of academic work (Zapp et al., 2021).

From a marketing governance perspective, institutional isomorphism shapes both what universities do and what they say they do. The homogenization of digital strategies across higher education institutions creates a complex marketing environment in which genuine differentiation becomes difficult, and the risk of commodification of the educational offering increases. Studies from other national contexts similarly document how globalization and international rankings generate isomorphic pressures that encourage higher education institutions to converge in structures and strategies, often at the expense of institutional distinctiveness and authentic positioning (Bhalerao et al., 2025). A recent scoping review confirms that institutional isomorphism remains a central interpretive lens for understanding how quality assurance reforms diffuse across higher education systems, while also highlighting

the capacity of universities to adapt, negotiate, or selectively resist these pressures (Guil Gorostidi and Rubio-Arostegui, 2026).

1.3. The Risk of Means–Ends Decoupling

While institutional isomorphism explains the convergence of digital strategies across higher education, it does not fully account for the persistent gap between formal policy adoption and actual educational outcomes. This phenomenon is best captured by Bromley and Powell's (2012) concept of *means–ends decoupling*. Unlike conventional policy–practice decoupling, in which organizations adopt formal rules but routinely ignore them in everyday operation, means–ends decoupling characterizes organizations operating under intense institutional scrutiny and regulatory pressure (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Athanasopoulou et al., 2024). In such environments, organizations do implement the required policies and technical structures (the means), but these implemented practices maintain only a weak or ambiguous connection to the organization's core social objectives or to the outcomes they are intended to produce (the ends) (Bromley and Powell, 2012).

In the context of higher education digitalization, means–ends decoupling describes scenarios in which university projects are implemented exactly as planned, equipment is procured, laboratories are built, compliance reports are submitted, but the expected improvements in teaching quality, student engagement, equity of access, or learning outcomes fail to materialize (Hladchenko and Vossensteyn, 2019). This pattern has direct implications for marketing governance: if the digital capabilities communicated to prospective students, employers, and accreditation bodies are not matched by genuine educational improvements, the institution's brand credibility is structurally compromised. Bromley and Powell (2012) warn that when this pattern persists, organizations develop increasingly complex accountability structures, divert resources from core educational goals, and become trapped in a demanding cycle of symbolic reform that is visible in published strategy documents but weakly connected to everyday educational practice.

1.4. The Romanian Context: Systemic Vulnerabilities

Within the Romanian higher education system, recent empirical research documents a pattern consistent with the theoretical frameworks outlined above. Cuglesan (2025) demonstrates that digitalization efforts in leading Romanian universities have been predominantly top–down and reactive, driven by strong financial incentives from European Union programmes rather than by internally developed pedagogical strategies or coherent institutional positioning. Due to historically limited domestic expertise in digital policy formulation and fragmented institutional capacity at both the national ministerial and individual university levels, strategic initiatives are frequently narrow in scope, heavily focused on infrastructural compliance, and structurally vulnerable to deep means–ends decoupling (Cuglesan, 2025; Hladchenko and Vossensteyn, 2019).

While prior studies have examined digitalization in higher education or analyzed specific policy instruments in isolation, fewer works have systematically compared how different institutional actors across multiple governance levels construct, communicate, and implement digital transformation within a single national context. This paper addresses this gap by mapping and comparing the policy orientations, governance instruments, and institutional communication strategies of supranational bodies, the Romanian state, the quality assurance agency, and individual universities, and by relating these findings to the risk of means–ends decoupling in the marketing governance of higher education digitalization.

2. Methodology

To analyze the attitudes, strategies, and governance approaches of the principal actors involved in higher education digitalization in Romania, this study employs qualitative documentary analysis combined with systematic cross-actor comparison. Rather than quantifying operational outputs, such as the number of devices procured or the volume of funds absorbed, the methodology examines how institutional documents frame digitalization, what governance logics they reflect, and how responsibility and accountability are distributed across the system. This approach is consistent with established practice in marketing governance research, where the analysis of institutional communication and framing constitutes a primary mode of inquiry (Morgan, 2012).

The concept of *institutional attitude* is central to the analytical framework adopted in this paper. In this context, institutional attitude denotes the overall policy orientation of an actor, as manifest in how the actor frames digitalization, what strategic objectives it articulates, what governance instruments it deploys, and what accountability model it implies. Institutional attitude, in this sense, represents the intersection of institutional framing, strategic communication, and governance logic, a construct closely related to the concept of organizational positioning in the marketing literature (Kotler et al., 2021).

2.1. Document Corpus and Triangulation

The analytical timeframe encompasses the period from 2020 to 2026. This window captures the pandemic-induced shift to emergency remote teaching, the formulation of European and national recovery frameworks, and the implementation of systemic legislative reforms that formalized the digital transition in Romania. The empirical corpus was designed to represent the multi-level governance architecture of European higher education, drawing on five categories of primary documents.

Documents were analyzed in three sequential stages. First, all documents were screened for relevance to the research questions, focusing on sections addressing digital tools, teaching and learning strategy, funding conditions, and quality assurance standards in higher education. Documents mentioning digitalization only peripherally were excluded from detailed analysis. Second, key sentences and passages were assigned thematic labels, including 'infrastructure', 'pedagogy', 'coercive pressure', 'quality standards', and 'grant absorption', recorded in a structured coding table alongside the document source and the governance level of the actor. Third, coded material was compared across actor groups, with labels consolidated into four analytical dimensions: policy framing, stated objectives, governance instruments, and implied accountability model. These dimensions are summarized in Table 1. Coding consistency was maintained by piloting the label scheme on an initial subset of documents and resolving interpretive disagreements through discussion prior to full-corpus application.

Data triangulation was achieved by drawing on primary strategic documents, legislative acts, funding guidelines, and institutional policy declarations from distinct governance levels, including: the European Commission's *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027* (European Commission, 2020); the Romanian Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 (Romanian Parliament, 2023) and associated ministerial orders; official documentation pertaining to PNRR Component 15, Investment 16 (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2021); ARACIS evaluation standards for the 2025/2026 academic cycle (ARACIS, 2025); and publicly available project descriptions and strategic announcements from individual universities, including the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Transilvania University of Braşov, the University of Oradea, and Titu Maiorescu University.

2.2. Analytical Strategy: Actor-Centred Institutionalism

The analytical strategy is explicitly actor-centred. Rather than attempting to quantitatively measure digital performance outcomes, which are difficult to standardize across autonomous institutions and are not the primary concern of institutional actors' policy communications, the analysis maps how differing actors construct the meaning, strategic priorities, and governance logics of digital transformation. The analysis evaluates each actor across four specific dimensions: (1) *policy framing* — how the actor defines the problem or opportunity of digital transformation; (2) *stated objectives* — the explicit goals communicated in strategic and legislative documents; (3) *governance instruments* — the specific tools deployed, ranging from soft-law guidance to binding financial conditionalities; and (4) *implied governance model* — the architecture of control, accountability, and reporting that the actor's approach presupposes. This four-dimension framework reflects established approaches to institutional communication analysis in marketing governance research (Morgan, 2012; Kotler et al., 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

The findings confirm that digital transformation in university education is not a singular, coherent process. Rather, it is constituted through negotiation and, frequently, through contestation among actor groups that possess unequal resources, occupy different governance positions, and hold divergent understandings of what digitalization should accomplish. The analysis identifies four distinct institutional attitudes, each with characteristic governance logics and associated risks of means–ends decoupling.

3.1. Supranational Steering: Ecosystem Integration and Coercive Funding

At the supranational level, the European Union frames digital transformation not as a technical upgrade for individual institutions, but as a systemic precondition for Europe's future educational quality, social inclusion, and economic competitiveness. The EU's institutional attitude is strongly integrative: digital education is positioned as a structural priority, communicated through ambitious normative frameworks, and backed by substantial financial and regulatory instruments. The *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027* constitutes the primary policy instrument at this level, aiming to construct a robust digital education ecosystem and raise digital literacy and skills across the European population (European Commission, 2020). The European Commission's approach goes beyond hardware funding, seeking instead to build an interoperable, pan-European governance architecture in which higher education is connected through digital infrastructures, shared data standards, and coordinated quality assurance frameworks.

Critically, the EU deploys its considerable financial authority to translate normative ambitions into legally binding obligations. Through the NextGenerationEU recovery package, the Commission conditions access to billions of euros on the achievement of specific digital milestones, transforming digitalization from a voluntary innovation choice into a mandatory governance requirement (European Commission, 2021). This mechanism constitutes a paradigmatic instance of coercive isomorphism in the sense of DiMaggio and Powell (1983): member states and, through them, universities, face strong financial incentives to conform to externally defined digital standards. The EU's approach is characterized by a low direct risk of means–ends decoupling at the supranational level, as the Commission focuses on architectural standards and strategic coordination rather than operational implementation. However, this strength is simultaneously a structural vulnerability: by delegating implementation to national and institutional actors with unequal capacities, the EU creates the conditions within which decoupling can occur at lower governance levels.

3.2. National Policy: Legislative Reform and Structural Funding

The Romanian Government's institutional attitude toward digitalization is characterized by legislative ambition, substantial financial commitment, and significant administrative vulnerability. The adoption of Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 represents a decisive legislative turn, formally incorporating digital education into the core regulatory framework of the national higher education system (Romanian Parliament, 2023). The law establishes clear legal parameters for hybrid and fully online programmes, requires compliance with ARACIS quality assurance standards, and mandates systemic digitalization through interoperable data governance frameworks across all universities. A particularly significant element is the Single National Integrated Register of Diplomas and Study Documents (RUNIDAS), funded through EU structural funds, which issues QR-coded, bilingual diplomas to ensure document traceability, reduce fraud, and enable graduate career tracking. Diplomas not registered in RUNIDAS are not legally valid, making institutional adoption compulsory.

Concurrently, the state has advanced the systemic integration of dual education, reflecting a 'Bologna 2.0' philosophy of combining academic and applied learning pathways, with significant support from PNRR funds. This initiative encompasses 29 regional consortia and integrated vocational campuses incorporating mandatory digital training workshops. By the 2024/2025 academic year, 18 dual bachelor programmes had been implemented across major institutions, with dual master programmes actively expanding. In terms of financial scale, PNRR Component 15 (Education), Investment 16 allocated approximately €234 million specifically for university digitalization, covering both infrastructure and staff digital competence development (Ministry of Education, 2022). These competitive grants prioritize the creation of advanced digital hubs, cybersecurity systems, and improvements in the digital competences of academic staff and students.

Despite the evident ambition of these reforms, the government's institutional attitude is constrained by weak administrative capacity and a structural dependence on temporary external funding. The cyclical nature of PNRR financing, which operates through short project timelines rather than stable national budget commitments, creates a significant vulnerability: many current digitalization efforts are project-based rather than institutionally embedded, raising serious questions about their sustainability beyond the PNRR cycle. From a marketing governance perspective, this pattern reflects a risk of institutional brand inconsistency, whereby the government communicates a durable commitment to digital transformation while the underlying financing model is inherently time-limited.

3.3. Quality Assurance and Normative Governance

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) operates as the primary vector for normative isomorphism within the national higher education system, translating legislative mandates and European quality standards into operational evaluation criteria that directly govern institutional accreditation. ARACIS displays a structured, risk-aware institutional attitude that prioritizes quality assurance, transparency, and controlled expansion of digital provision through systematically revised evaluation standards (ARACIS, 2025).

Between 2020 and 2026, ARACIS comprehensively revised its discipline-specific evaluation criteria, spanning domains C1 through C13, covering fields from Exact Sciences to Humanities and Engineering, to incorporate rigorous benchmarks for digital learning platforms, synchronous teaching methodologies, and digital library access. Under the authority conferred by Law 199/2023, ARACIS now evaluates not only whether universities possess digital platforms but also how effectively those platforms are used to support teaching quality and equitable student access. Additionally, ARACIS enforces strict digital transparency

requirements: national regulations mandate that every doctoral thesis be uploaded to a platform managed by UEFISCDI and remain publicly accessible for 90 days prior to the public defence, during which any interested party may raise concerns about plagiarism or academic integrity breaches. By linking these digital governance requirements directly to the accreditation and operational survival of study programmes, ARACIS creates powerful normative pressure for compliance.

The risk of means–ends decoupling at the ARACIS level is moderate rather than high. The agency's evaluation frameworks are substantive and technically detailed, going beyond simple presence-or-absence checklists to examine how digital tools are integrated into pedagogical practice. However, the codification of complex pedagogical processes into standardized evaluation criteria carries an inherent risk: institutions may focus on satisfying the formal letter of the standards, acquiring the required platforms, submitting the required documentation, rather than on the genuine quality of digital learning experiences. This risk of bureaucratic isomorphism, where compliance with formal criteria displaces attention to substantive educational quality, is well documented in the quality assurance literature (Guil Gorostidi and Rubio-Arostegui, 2026).

3.4. Institutional Pragmatism: Universities Navigating Coercive Isomorphism

At the institutional level, Romanian universities display a predominantly pragmatic attitude toward digitalization, strongly shaped by their dependence on external resources and by the compliance requirements of PNRR funding cycles and ARACIS accreditation processes (Cuglesan, 2025). University leadership broadly endorses the principle of digital transformation as essential for institutional modernization and international visibility; in practice, however, institutional behaviors closely tracks the logic of available funding programmes rather than reflecting coherent, internally developed digital pedagogical strategies.

Publicly available project documentation reveals a strong emphasis on technical infrastructure procurement. Transilvania University of Braşov secured 34.7 million RON to upgrade research infrastructure, digital skills capacity, and student IT services (Transilvania University of Braşov, 2022). Titu Maiorescu University obtained 12.8 million RON for constructing an integrated high-quality education and research ecosystem centred on advanced technologies and digital resources (Titu Maiorescu University, 2022). A particularly illustrative case is the University of Oradea, which allocated approximately 76% of a total 30.2 million RON project budget to digital hardware and equipment, with a substantially smaller share reserved for staff training or curriculum reform (University of Oradea, 2023).

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) provides a comparable pattern at a larger institutional scale. Through the PNRR-funded project '*Universitatea sustenabilă prin digitalizare — ASE 4.0*' (39.5 million RON), ASE has invested significantly in new digital laboratories, covering artificial intelligence, 3D printing, cybersecurity, virtual and augmented reality, and digital business transformation, alongside data center infrastructure and modern audiovisual equipment for over 100 seminar rooms (ASE, 2024). The project also allocates more than 2.8 million RON to an advanced digital skills training programme for 350 academic staff and 50 auxiliary personnel and commits to updating 31 bachelor's and master's programmes to incorporate advanced digital competences for students.

From a marketing governance perspective, the pattern observable across these university projects is revealing. Institutional communications and project narratives describe in substantial detail the procurement and installation of hardware, platforms, laboratories, and networks, consistently highlighting the goal of creating a 'modern' or 'smart' campus capable of attracting students and improving international rankings (Transilvania University of Braşov,

2022; University of Oradea, 2023; ASE, 2024). By contrast, references to concrete educational outcomes, changes in course design, assessment innovation, measurable improvements in student engagement, or support mechanisms for disadvantaged groups, tend to be brief and generic, typically limited to broad claims that digital tools will 'improve teaching quality' or 'support innovative learning', without specifying how these improvements will be achieved, measured, or evaluated. This pattern reflects a fundamental tension in institutional marketing communication: the gap between the aspirational positioning communicated to external stakeholders and the operational reality of educational transformation (Kotler et al., 2021).

Taken together, university budget allocations and institutional communications exhibit the structural characteristics of means–ends decoupling as theorized by Bromley and Powell (2012). Universities respond decisively to financial incentives by absorbing large grants and investing in visible infrastructure, satisfying the external expectations of funding auditors and accreditation bodies. The limited attention devoted to defining pedagogical objectives, designing outcome measurement frameworks, and embedding digital tools within reformed curriculum structures suggests that procurement and project completion have, in practice, become the primary indicators of institutional success, while deeper transformations in teaching culture and learning outcomes remain loosely connected to digital investments and deferred to an undefined future (Athanasopoulou et al., 2024).

3.5. Discussion: Decoupling Dynamics in Multi-Level Governance

A cross-actor analysis reveals a higher education system in which institutional actors at all governance levels endorse digital transformation in principle but remain divided about its substantive educational goals. The principal fault line in Romanian higher education digitalization is no longer between advocates and sceptics of technology adoption. Rather, it lies between the ambitious digital strategies articulated at higher governance levels and the constrained capacity of universities to translate those strategies into durable improvements in teaching, learning, and student experience.

This situation generates persistent tension between the isomorphic dynamics identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and the decoupling risks theorized by Bromley and Powell (2012). The Romanian Government, channeling European funding, creates strong coercive pressure for universities to adopt standardized digital architectures. Universities, dependent on these resources for operational survival and reputational competitiveness, rapidly adopt the required systems. Because this adoption is predominantly externally incentivized, however, it is structurally prone to decoupling: visible modernization, procurement of servers, publication of digital strategies, completion of PNRR project milestones, proceeds rapidly, while deeper transformation of teaching culture, curriculum design, and institutional learning follows a much slower trajectory.

When the implementation of digital policy (the means) becomes an end in itself, evaluated primarily by the pace of grant absorption rather than by demonstrable improvements in student learning, the higher education system enters what Bromley and Powell (2012) describe as a cycle of symbolic reform: institutionally expensive, externally legitimate, but weakly connected to core educational goals. The distinction drawn by Athanasopoulou et al. (2024) between *consistency-oriented* and *experimental* implementation is instructive here. Under the dual pressure of PNRR auditing requirements and ARACIS accreditation standards, Romanian universities operate predominantly in a consistency-oriented mode: standardized digital practices are rolled out uniformly across the institution to demonstrate compliance with external indicators. Genuine digital transformation, however, requires a shift toward experimental implementation, testing how digital tools function within specific disciplinary

contexts, systematically evaluating outcomes, and continuously refining pedagogical practice on the basis of evidence.

From a marketing governance perspective, this analysis has significant implications for how universities position themselves and communicate their value to stakeholders. The credibility and long-term sustainability of institutional digital positioning depend on closing the gap between the aspirational narratives communicated in project documentation and marketing materials, and the measurable improvements in educational quality and student outcomes that those narratives promise. Universities that successfully bridge this gap will be better positioned not only in terms of accreditation compliance, but also in terms of attracting students, securing faculty, and maintaining the trust of employers and public funding bodies.

Table 1. Summary Matrix: Institutional Actors' Attitudes, Governance Logics, and Decoupling Risk

Institutional Actor	Dominant Policy Emphasis	Implied Governance Logic	Means–Ends Decoupling Risk
European Union	Ecosystem integration, digital competences, strategic coordination, AI and data governance standards.	Conditional structural funding; hard-law regulatory framing; non-negotiable milestones.	Low – Focuses on overarching digital architecture and European Education Area standards, but depends on national execution capacity.
Romanian Government	Infrastructure investment, diploma traceability (RUNIDAS), dual education, rapid legislative modernization.	Law 199/2023; PNRR competitive grant coercion; top-down capital allocation.	High – Prioritises rapid capital absorption and legislative milestones over deep pedagogical and organizational reform.
ARACIS	Quality assurance, standardized evaluation criteria (C1–C13), transparency, academic integrity enforcement.	Normative compliance frameworks; accreditation conditionality; public accountability mechanisms.	Moderate – Metrics risk becoming bureaucratic compliance checkboxes rather than drivers of genuine pedagogical excellence.
Universities	Pragmatic grant absorption, hardware procurement, infrastructure visibility, reputational signaling.	Project-based, consistency-oriented implementation driven by external funding cycles.	Very High – Intense external pressure to adopt digital platforms without corresponding shifts in human capacity, pedagogy, or institutional culture.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on empirical documentary analysis (2020–2026).

Conclusions

The digital transformation of the Romanian higher education sector represents a historically unprecedented system-wide shift, transitioning from the ad hoc emergency practices of the pandemic period toward a more strategically planned and regulated digital governance architecture. The present analysis demonstrates that institutional actors at all governance levels broadly support digital transformation in their policy communications, but approach its implementation through divergent governance logics, deploy different instruments, and generate markedly different levels of decoupling risk.

The central finding of this research is that, despite massive capital injections through the PNRR and significant regulatory restructuring through Higher Education Law No. 199/2023, the Romanian higher education sector remains structurally vulnerable to means–ends

decoupling. Driven by the coercive incentive structure of European funding mechanisms and the normative compliance requirements of ARACIS accreditation, universities respond pragmatically, rapidly procuring digital infrastructure to satisfy external performance expectations. Deeper digital transformation, in the sense of substantive changes to pedagogical practice, curriculum design, and the quality of student learning experiences, continues to lag significantly behind these investments. The procurement of technology is successfully executed as a visible policy output and as a marketable institutional credential, but it remains frequently decoupled from the transformative educational outcomes it is intended to produce.

To address this systemic risk and ensure that the historic investments currently transforming Romanian higher education yield durable improvements in educational quality and institutional positioning, several strategic imperatives merit attention. First, evaluation frameworks, both those developed by ARACIS and those embedded in PNRR grant conditions, must transition from input-oriented metrics, such as the volume of hardware procured or the number of digital platforms deployed, toward rigorous outcome-oriented measures centered on pedagogical effectiveness, student engagement, and learning equity. Second, investment profiles must be rebalanced to prioritize sustained human capital development. Meaningful digital transformation depends critically on the digital pedagogical competences of academic staff. Universities should integrate continuous professional development in digital pedagogy into academic career structures and performance evaluation frameworks, rather than treating it as a supplementary project activity. Third, institutions must develop robust internal administrative capacities capable of managing long-term digital lifecycles independently of cyclical external funding injections, which are a prerequisite for moving from project-based compliance toward genuinely institutionalized digital practice.

From a marketing governance perspective, the broader implication of these findings is clear: the long-term sustainability and credibility of universities' digital positioning strategies depend on closing the gap between aspiration and reality. Institutions that successfully align their external communication of digital transformation with genuine improvements in educational quality will build stronger, more differentiated, and more trustworthy institutional brands, capable of attracting students, faculty, and funding on the basis of authentic value rather than symbolic compliance.

This study is subject to several limitations. It is based exclusively on documentary analysis and does not incorporate interviews, ethnographic observation, or student and faculty surveys, and therefore captures official policy orientations rather than everyday institutional practice. The analysis is limited to a single national context and a specific time window (2020–2026), limiting direct generalization to other higher education systems or to later implementation phases. Future research should extend the analysis by combining documentary methods with qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with institutional leaders and academic staff, and by systematically comparing Romania with other European higher education systems navigating similar digital governance challenges.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used an AI-assisted drafting tool to support language formulation, structural organization, and the synthesis of cited sources. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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