

THE CRISIS OF THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY MODEL: BETWEEN MARKET LOGIC AND ACADEMIC AUTONOMY

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Abstract: The article examines the structural crisis of the neoliberal university model through a systematic analysis of how market logic erodes academic autonomy in contemporary higher education. The research employs a mixed-method critical-analytical approach that combines a structured synthesis of peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2023, comparative documentary analysis of institutional indicators from the European University Association Autonomy Scorecard and the Academic Freedom Index time-series, and analytical decomposition of governance, financing, and labour regimes across European and Anglo-American higher education systems. The central finding is that the erosion of academic autonomy operates through four coupled mechanisms — financial dependency, managerial governance, evaluative metrification, and discursive recasting of the academic subject — which form a self-reinforcing system rather than independent policy choices. The empirical pattern reveals a structural paradox in which higher education systems with the highest formal scores on institutional autonomy frequently exhibit the most intensive precarity of academic labour and the steepest declines on substantive indicators of academic freedom. The original contribution of this article is the introduction of the analytical framework of coupled mechanisms of autonomy erosion, which clarifies why isolated reforms targeting only one dimension of neoliberalisation systematically fail to restore substantive autonomy. The paper closes with implications for European Higher Education Area policy, arguing that genuine restoration of academic autonomy requires simultaneous intervention across all four mechanisms rather than incremental adjustments. Methodological limitations include reliance on aggregate institutional data and the English-language concentration of the source literature.

Keywords: *neoliberal university, academic autonomy, marketisation, academic capitalism, audit culture, higher education governance, academic freedom, casualisation.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary university is in the midst of a structural transformation whose depth has only recently become fully visible. Over the last three decades, higher education systems across the European Higher Education Area and the Anglo-American world have been reorganised around a set of governing principles that re-describe knowledge as a commodity, students as consumers, faculty as labour input, and the university itself as an enterprise competing in a global market. The European Higher Education Area now encompasses more than thirty-eight million students across forty-eight participating countries (Eurydice, 2020), yet the apparent expansion of access has coincided with an intensifying crisis of the institutional form that traditionally underwrote that access. Public expenditure on tertiary education in OECD countries averages 0.9% of GDP, but private

contributions now amount to nearly one-third of total tertiary funding in member states, and in some Anglo-American systems exceed two-thirds of operating revenue (OECD, 2023). The displacement of public financing has not been a marginal adjustment; it has reshaped the governance, the labour relations, the evaluative criteria, and ultimately the self-understanding of the university as an institution. The crisis under examination here is not the cyclical financial crisis that follows recessions or pandemic shocks, but a structural crisis of the model itself. The pandemic of 2020-2022 did not generate this crisis; it accelerated and exposed it. As Mok and Montgomery (2021) argue, the COVID-19 emergency functioned as a magnifying glass for pre-existing pathologies, including programme closures, layoffs of contingent faculty, and the transfer of educational decision-making from collegial bodies to corporate executives. Muzzatti (2022) documents how the pandemic was used in some institutional settings as a justification to “turbocharge the corporate model in higher education”, confirming that the crisis is not an external event but an internal logic that periodically intensifies.

The central question of this article is therefore not whether the neoliberal university is in crisis — the empirical record on this point is overwhelming — but rather how the crisis operates. Does it operate as a set of separable policy choices that can be reversed individually, or does it operate as a coupled system whose components mutually reinforce one another? The answer to this question has direct consequences for any reform agenda. If the components are separable, then incremental adjustments — for example, capping tuition fees while leaving the audit regime in place — can restore academic autonomy. If, however, the components are coupled, such adjustments cannot succeed, because the unaltered components will reproduce the conditions that the altered component was supposed to remedy. The article advances three hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the erosion of academic autonomy in the contemporary university operates through four coupled mechanisms — financial, governmental, evaluative, and discursive — rather than through independent policy interventions. The second hypothesis is that formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy diverge under neoliberal governance, producing what is here termed the paradox of autonomy: systems scoring highest on institutional autonomy indices simultaneously exhibit the most intensive precarisation of academic labour and the steepest decline on substantive academic-freedom indicators. The third hypothesis is that reform initiatives targeting only one of the four mechanisms systematically fail to restore substantive autonomy because the unaltered mechanisms compensate for the local change.

The original contribution of this article lies in the introduction of an analytical framework — here designated the framework of coupled mechanisms of autonomy erosion — that decomposes the neoliberalisation of higher education into four interlocking dimensions and demonstrates that each mechanism, when intensified, amplifies the others through specifiable feedback paths. The framework is novel because previous accounts have either treated neoliberalisation as a unitary phenomenon (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2020), as a typology of national varieties (Jessop, 2017; Schulze-Cleven & Olson, 2017), or as a set of organisational levels (Sigahi & Saltorato, 2020), without specifying the recursive relationships among mechanisms that account for the system's reproductive stability. The framework makes the crisis legible not as a sum of policy choices but as a configuration of mutually reinforcing pressures. The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature on academic capitalism, marketisation, audit culture, and academic freedom, and presents the methodology. The third section reports empirical findings drawn from institutional indicators and the synthesised literature. Four analytical sections then develop the four mechanisms of autonomy erosion in detail and show how each amplifies the others. The conclusion tests the three hypotheses against the evidence, recapitulates the original contribution, and identifies methodological limitations and directions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The literature on the neoliberalisation of higher education has expanded considerably in the period 2015-2023, with at least three identifiable strands of analysis. The first strand develops the foundational diagnosis of higher education as the site of a generalised political-economic mutation. Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism operates not merely as an economic policy but as a political rationality that economises all spheres of life, including the public university, by recasting human agents as units of human capital and by replacing democratic deliberation with managerial calculation. Giroux (2020), in the second edition of his sustained critique, situates the corporate transformation of the university as part of a broader assault on democratic institutions, contending that the university has become a key battleground for the fight against authoritarianism in the era of populist resurgence. Collini (2017) reaches a parallel conclusion from a different starting point: managerialism has displaced traditional academic administration, prioritising the procedures, values, and interests of business managers over the constitutive purposes of the university. These authors do not converge on a single causal account, but they share a diagnosis: the university has been hollowed out as a site of public-good knowledge formation.

A second strand, more empirically oriented, has refined the analytical apparatus of academic capitalism. Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) propose a classification scheme that distinguishes three analytical levels of academic capitalism — macrostructural, organisational, and individual — and four thematic clusters: theoretical exploration, framework creation, research applications, and emerging trends. Their systematic review identifies five concrete operational features: new circuits of knowledge such as research-and-development partnerships, new funding streams such as patents and royalties, intermediating organisations such as professional associations, interstitial organisations such as offices managing public-private partnerships, and an extended managerial capacity comprising enrolment managers and other non-academic personnel. Jessop (2017) develops the concept of varieties of academic capitalism, arguing that the entrepreneurial university operates through internal and external profit-generating logics that reshape the academic mission. Schulze-Cleven and Olson (2017) demonstrate, through comparative analysis of the United States, Germany, and Norway, that welfare states have strengthened market principles in university governance while shaping competition in nationally specific ways, producing distinct varieties of academic capitalism rather than a uniform model. Croucher and Lacy (2022), drawing on interviews with one hundred and sixteen Australian higher education leaders, document the emergence of academic capitalism as a perceived inevitability among senior leaders, with reform horizons extending ten to twenty years. Brunner and colleagues (2019) examine the circulation and reception of academic-capitalism theory in Latin America, showing how regional adaptations preserve the analytical core while inflecting it with concerns about state autonomy and decolonisation.

A third strand focuses on the experiential dimension of neoliberalisation — the way market logic is lived by academics and students. Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023) conduct a meta-synthesis of twenty-four studies on academic identity in the neoliberalised academy, concluding that academic identity is fundamentally reconstituted in the social, economic, cultural, and political context of the academy and that neoliberal transformations have produced widespread identity disorientation among faculty. Burton and Bowman (2022), introducing a special issue on the academic precariat, document the systemic conditions under which precarious labour is produced and naturalised in higher education. Leathwood and Read (2022), drawing on interviews with twenty UK academics on casualised contracts, show that the temporal short-termism of casualised employment systematically undermines pedagogical relationships, programme continuity, and the formation of disciplinary expertise. Morrish (2019), in a widely cited Higher Education Policy Institute report, marshals administrative data from fifty-nine UK higher education institutions to demonstrate a substantial increase in mental-health

referrals among university staff between 2009 and 2016, attributing the trend to performance-management regimes derived from the Research Excellence Framework. Silverio and colleagues (2021) analyse the cultural recasting of the student as consumer and the academic as commodified service-provider, drawing on textual analysis of media representations of higher education. Morley (2024) develops a narrative-ethnographic critique of the systemic neoliberal colonisation of higher education, arguing that everyday managerial practices produce the obliteration of academic practice itself. Closely related is the literature on audit culture and rankings. Gadd (2021) presents a sustained critical analysis of global university rankings, demonstrating that the metrics they deploy — citation counts, reputation surveys, staff-student ratios — are systematically poor proxies for the quality dimensions they purport to measure, and that the reliance on these metrics produces homogenising pressures that disadvantage non-Anglophone systems. Hamann and Ringel (2023) extend this critique by analysing the discursive resilience of rankings: rankers do not avoid criticism but absorb it strategically, neutralising challenges through discursive accommodation rather than methodological reform. Fredricks-Lowman and Smith-Isabell (2020) connect this evaluative regime to the more general ideology of higher education as both public good and commodity, identifying a structural contradiction at the heart of contemporary university governance. Marginson (2018) provides a synthesis of public-private distinctions in higher education, integrating economic and political theoretical traditions and producing a four-domain framework that distinguishes civil society, social democracy, state quasi-markets, and commercial markets as overlapping but analytically distinct registers in which higher education simultaneously operates.

The literature on academic freedom has acquired new urgency. Olssen (2022), in his contribution to the Handbook on Academic Freedom edited by Watermeyer, Raaper and Olssen (2022), argues that the incursions of neoliberalism into university governance have systematically weakened the institutional preconditions of academic freedom, including secure employment, collegial governance, and protected time for research. Oleksiyenko (2021), examining post-Soviet higher education, identifies what he calls surrogate academic freedom — the formal institutional recognition of freedom in conditions where the substantive practices of critical inquiry have been hollowed out. Spannagel and Kinzelbach (2023) introduce the Academic Freedom Index, a global time-series dataset coded by more than two thousand country experts, which documents declines in academic freedom in fifty countries over the last decade against improvements in only nine. A final strand of recent work focuses on the COVID-19 acceleration of pre-existing trajectories. Mok and Montgomery (2021) and Muzzatti (2022) converge on the diagnosis that the pandemic was used by some institutional leaderships as a justification to deepen the corporate transformation of universities, with closures of programmes, layoffs of contingent faculty, and the transfer of educational decisions from collegial bodies to executive committees. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) reports that the precarity of academic research careers worsened markedly during the pandemic period, with the share of PhD graduates on temporary contracts in EU countries reaching levels between twenty and forty-nine per cent against an EU-wide average of eleven per cent for the general workforce. What unites these strands is an empirical convergence on the diagnosis that academic autonomy has been substantively eroded under the neoliberal model. What divides them is the analytical apparatus by which that erosion is rendered intelligible. The framework introduced in this article is positioned within the second and third strands but seeks to overcome a recurring limitation: the tendency to treat the dimensions of neoliberalisation as parallel rather than as recursively coupled.

Research Methodology

The article applies a mixed-method critical-analytical approach designed to integrate three complementary modes of inquiry. The first methodological component is a structured synthesis of peer-reviewed literature published in the period 2015-2023. The literature search was conducted

through systematic queries against major academic platforms — including ScienceDirect, Springer Nature Link, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals, and Cambridge Core — using a combination of thematic terms (neoliberal university, academic capitalism, marketisation, audit culture, casualisation, academic freedom, managerialism) and methodological filters (peer-reviewed, English-language, time range 2015-2023). All identified sources were verified through Crossref DOI resolution, with bibliographic metadata cross-checked against original publisher landing pages and at least one secondary academic database to eliminate the risk of fabricated or composite references. Sources that could not be verified across at least two independent academic platforms were excluded. The final corpus comprises twenty-nine verified sources, drawn from sixteen distinct peer-reviewed journals indexed in SCOPUS or Web of Science, six institutional reports, three monographs, and one edited handbook. The second methodological component is comparative documentary analysis of institutional indicators. The European University Association Autonomy Scorecard 2023, which gathers system-level data across thirty-five European higher education systems on more than thirty indicators in four dimensions (organisational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy), is treated as the primary indicator of formal institutional autonomy (EUA, 2023). The Academic Freedom Index 2023, produced by Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and the V-Dem Institute, with input from over two thousand country experts, is treated as the primary indicator of substantive academic freedom (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023; Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The OECD Education at a Glance 2023 dataset is used to derive comparative indicators of public and private expenditure on tertiary education (OECD, 2023). The OECD policy paper on the precarity of academic research careers (OECD, 2021) is used as the primary source for indicators of contractual precarity in the academic labour market. The Bologna Process Implementation Report (Eurydice, 2020) is used for indicators of the structural transformation of the European Higher Education Area. The third methodological component is the conceptual modelling that produces the framework of coupled mechanisms of autonomy erosion. This framework was constructed inductively through analytical decomposition of the literature corpus into recurring thematic clusters, followed by deductive specification of the feedback relations among those clusters. The decomposition identifies four mechanisms — financial dependency, managerial governance, evaluative metrification, and discursive recasting of the academic subject — and the specification identifies the pathways through which each mechanism intensifies the others. The framework is then tested against the empirical pattern emerging from the documentary analysis, which generates the central finding of the paradox of autonomy.

The geographical scope of the analysis is deliberately concentrated on the European Higher Education Area, with comparative reference to Anglo-American systems where the mechanisms are most pronounced. The temporal scope is the period 2015-2023, which spans the consolidation of the post-2008 austerity regime, the implementation of the third and fourth EUA Autonomy Scorecards, and the accelerating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations of the methodology include the aggregate character of the institutional indicators, which obscures within-system heterogeneity; the English-language concentration of the source literature, which underweights non-Anglophone analytical traditions; and the constraint that critical-analytical synthesis cannot substitute for primary fieldwork in particular national systems.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The empirical analysis generates findings that can be organised into four blocks corresponding to the four mechanisms identified by the analytical framework, followed by a fifth block reporting the relational pattern that links the four mechanisms. The first block of results concerns financial dependency and the displacement of public funding. Across OECD member states, the average share of total tertiary education expenditure financed from private sources stood at 30% in the most recent reference year, with substantial variation: in Anglophone systems such as the United Kingdom, the

United States, Australia, and Chile, the private share exceeds 60% (OECD, 2023). In the European Higher Education Area, the structural shift is visible in the expanding role of tuition fees and competitive research grants. The EUA Autonomy Scorecard 2023 documents that thirty-one of the thirty-five surveyed systems now permit higher education institutions to set or co-determine tuition fees in at least one student category, compared with twenty-six systems in the 2017 round (EUA, 2023). Twenty-eight systems permit institutions to engage in commercial borrowing, and twenty-five systems allow institutions to own the buildings they occupy and to dispose of them on the market — both features of financial autonomy in the EUA framework but also indicators of the institutional embedding into capital markets. The OECD reports that government expenditure on educational institutions, after transfers to the private sector, amounts to 4.3% of GDP on average, against private-sector contributions of 0.8% of GDP, with tertiary education dependent on private sources to a substantially greater degree than primary or secondary levels (OECD, 2023).

The second block of results concerns governance reform. The EUA Autonomy Scorecard 2023 documents large-scale governance-related reforms across multiple higher education systems, with a clear directional pattern: systems with previously unitary governance models have shifted toward dual structures featuring strengthened board-type bodies, while existing dual-structure systems have intensified the involvement of external members on governing boards (EUA, 2023). The frequent narrative justifying these reforms invokes efficiency in decision-making and a stronger connection to societal and economic interest. Croucher and Lacy (2022), drawing on interviews with one hundred and sixteen Australian higher education leaders, find that the emergence of academic capitalism is perceived as a structural inevitability among senior leadership, with the corollary erosion of collegial governance treated as the price of institutional viability. In the European context, the EUA documents that the number of systems with board chairs appointed by external bodies increased between the 2017 and 2023 Scorecard rounds, while the share of academic staff on governing boards declined in twelve of the thirty-five surveyed systems.

The third block of results concerns evaluative metrification. The Academic Freedom Index, drawing on inputs from over two thousand country experts and using V-Dem's item-response-theory measurement model, documents that academic freedom has declined in fifty countries over the last decade against improvements in only nine (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023; Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The decline is not concentrated in autocratic regimes alone; substantial declines have been recorded in Hungary, Poland, India, and the United States, with the latter showing accelerating declines in the most recent updates. Gadd (2021) provides a methodological dissection of the global university rankings, demonstrating that the citation metrics on which they rely systematically disadvantage research output in the humanities and social sciences and in non-Anglophone languages, that the reputation surveys measure brand awareness rather than scholarly quality, and that the staff-student ratios used as proxies for teaching quality are uncorrelated with student-learning outcomes. Hamann and Ringel (2023) extend the critique by demonstrating that rankers absorb such criticisms strategically, integrating selected critiques into ranking methodology without altering the core homogenising effects.

The fourth block of results concerns discursive recasting. Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023), in a meta-synthesis of twenty-four qualitative studies, document widespread reports of identity disorientation among academics in neoliberalised higher education systems, with respondents describing the gap between the values that drew them into the academy and the practices they are required to perform. Burton and Bowman (2022) document the systemic naturalisation of precarious labour in UK higher education, with widespread acceptance among early-career academics that fixed-term contracts, hourly-paid teaching, and grant-funded research positions constitute the new normal. Leathwood and Read (2022) report from interviews with twenty casualised UK academics that short-term employment systematically undermines the formation of disciplinary expertise, the continuity of pedagogical relationships, and the possibility of long-term scholarly programmes. Silverio and colleagues (2021) document the cultural saturation of the student-consumer image in the popular and

institutional representations of UK higher education, with academics correspondingly recast as service providers whose performance is evaluated through customer-satisfaction metrics.

The fifth and most consequential block of results concerns the relational pattern linking the four mechanisms. When the EUA Autonomy Scorecard scores on financial autonomy are cross-tabulated with the Academic Freedom Index trajectories and the OECD precarity indicators, a counterintuitive empirical pattern emerges. Systems scoring at the highest levels of formal financial autonomy — defined as institutional capacity to set fees, borrow, own assets, and accumulate surplus — frequently coincide with the highest levels of contractual precarity and with declining trajectories on the Academic Freedom Index. The United Kingdom illustrates the pattern: among the highest scorers on financial autonomy in the EUA framework, the country also reports that 44% of teaching-only contracts and 66.3% of research-only contracts are on fixed-term terms (drawn from administrative data summarised in Burton & Bowman, 2022), and the Academic Freedom Index records a downward trajectory in the most recent updates (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The empirical pattern suggests that formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy are not equivalent and may even diverge systematically. This pattern is the empirical foundation of what is termed the paradox of autonomy and forms the basis for the analytical model developed in the four sections that follow.

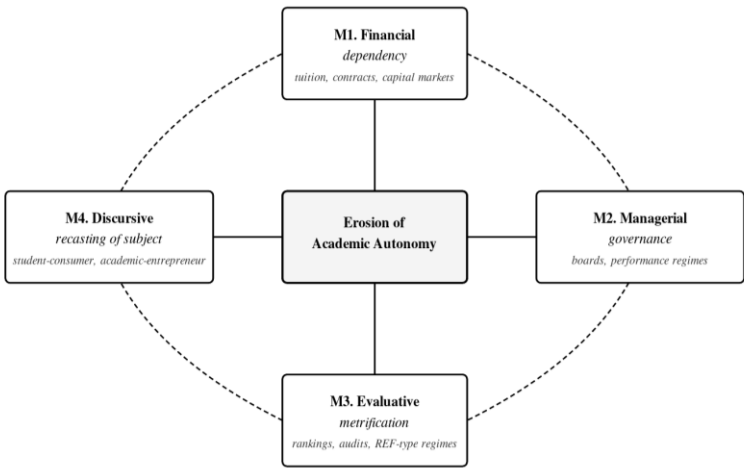


Figure 1. The framework of coupled mechanisms of autonomy erosion.

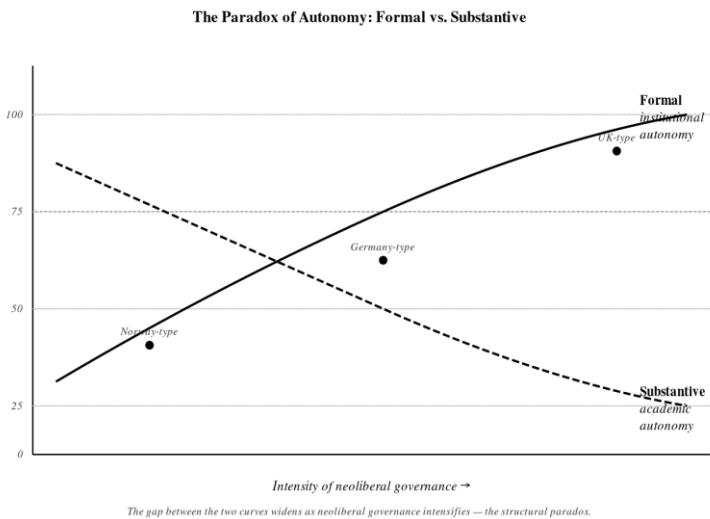


Figure 2. The paradox of autonomy: divergence between formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy as neoliberal governance intensifies.

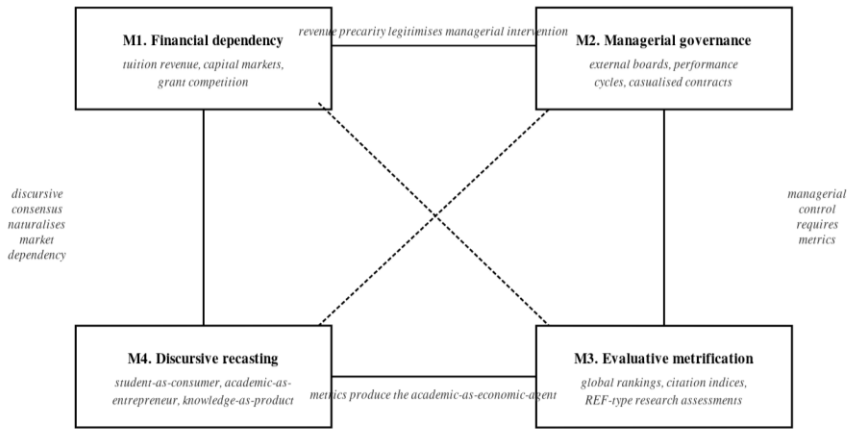


Figure 3. Recursive coupling among the four mechanisms; each mechanism produces conditions that intensify the others.

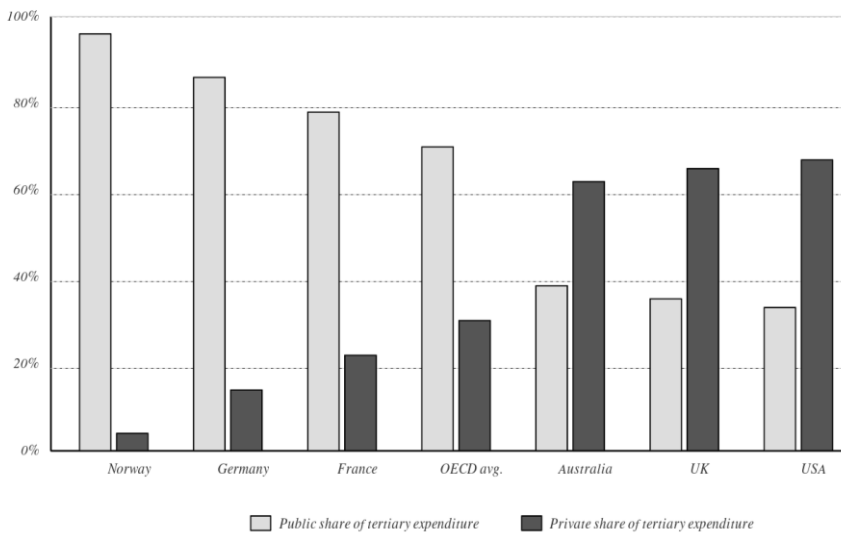


Figure 4. Public versus private share of tertiary education expenditure in selected systems (derived from OECD, 2023).

FINANCIAL DEPENDENCY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACCESS

The first mechanism of autonomy erosion operates at the level of revenue dependency. Universities have not become uniformly private, but they have become increasingly dependent on revenue streams whose persistence requires conformity with market signals. The mechanism does not eliminate public funding; it reorganises the relationship between public and private revenue in ways that subordinate the former to the logic of the latter. Marginson (2018) develops the conceptual apparatus needed to grasp this transformation. He distinguishes four domains in which higher education simultaneously operates: civil society, social democracy, state quasi-markets, and commercial markets. The neoliberal university does not abolish the first two domains, but it expands the third and fourth domains, and crucially organises the funding architecture so that survival in the third and fourth domains determines viability in the first two. The result is an asymmetry: the public-good dimensions of higher education persist on the condition that they are subsidised by the market-oriented activities, rather than the reverse.

The empirical magnitude of this transformation is substantial. The OECD (2023) reports that the share of total tertiary expenditure financed from private sources averages 30% across member states but reaches 65% in the United Kingdom, 73% in Chile, and 67% in the United States. In the European Higher Education Area, the EUA Autonomy Scorecard 2023 documents that thirty-one of the thirty-five surveyed systems now permit higher education institutions to set or co-determine tuition fees, against twenty-six systems in the previous round (EUA, 2023). The expansion of fee-setting autonomy is presented in the EUA framework as a positive indicator of institutional autonomy, but it functions in practice as a pathway through which institutions become dependent on student-as-consumer revenue. Once tuition revenue exceeds a critical threshold of total revenue, the institution's strategic decisions become structurally responsive to consumer demand, which in turn becomes responsive to credentialing signals from labour markets and ranking systems (Silverio et al., 2021).

The financialisation of higher education extends beyond tuition. Twenty-eight of the thirty-five EUA-surveyed systems now permit institutions to engage in commercial borrowing, and twenty-five systems allow institutions to own and dispose of assets on the market (EUA, 2023). These features expand institutional manoeuvring room but also expose institutions to capital-market discipline, as borrowing capacity becomes contingent on credit-rating assessments that explicitly evaluate the institution's market position, including its ranking, its enrolment trajectories, and its tuition-revenue stability. Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) document how this expansion of revenue diversification — patents, royalties, intellectual-property licensing, public-private partnerships, distance-education ventures — produces what they describe as extended managerial capacity, meaning a layer of non-academic personnel whose function is to manage the institution's market interfaces. The personnel growth is not incidental; it represents a redistribution of resources from academic to managerial functions that, once entrenched, produces internal constituencies committed to the further expansion of market-oriented revenue.

The pandemic period revealed the fragility of this revenue architecture. Mok and Montgomery (2021) document that institutions whose revenue depended heavily on international student fees experienced acute financial shocks during the border closures of 2020-2021, with several Anglophone systems reporting double-digit revenue contractions. Muzzatti (2022) shows that institutional responses to the shock did not reverse the financial-dependency mechanism but intensified it, with austerity measures including programme closures and layoffs of contingent faculty being justified through the discourse of fiscal necessity. The OECD (2021) confirms that the share of academic researchers on temporary contracts increased rather than decreased during the pandemic period, with the proportion of recent PhD graduates on temporary contracts in EU countries reaching levels between 20% and 49% against an EU workforce average of 11%. The mechanism reproduces itself through what Brown (2015) describes as the economisation of all spheres. Once the institution is financially dependent on market revenue, its internal governance must align with market-responsive priorities, its academic offerings must align with credentialing demand, and its evaluative criteria must align with metrics that reassure external assessors. The mechanism is not exogenous to the institution; it becomes its internal organising principle. This is the first reason the framework of coupled mechanisms is preferable to a pluralist account: financial dependency is not merely one pressure alongside others, but a structural condition that conditions the operation of the other three mechanisms. The EUA framework records this transformation as an expansion of autonomy because it focuses on legal-formal capacity (EUA, 2023). The framework developed here interprets the same transformation as a substitution of public accountability with market discipline, which is a different category of constraint but no less binding.

The financial mechanism also operates internationally. Schulze-Cleven and Olson (2017) demonstrate, in their comparative analysis of the United States, Germany, and Norway, that even welfare states with strong public funding traditions have introduced market principles into university governance, producing distinct national varieties of academic capitalism rather than a uniform model.

The pattern is reinforced by Brunner and colleagues (2019), who document the spread of academic-capitalism logics into Latin American higher education through the channels of supranational policy frameworks, donor priorities, and ranking-driven competition. The cumulative effect is a global homogenisation of revenue architectures, even where the precise institutional forms remain nationally specific. Croucher and Lacy (2022) report that Australian higher education leaders perceive the financial transformation as structural and irreversible, framing the question not as whether to participate in academic capitalism but as how to compete within it.

A central consequence of financial dependency is the commodification of access. Fredricks-Lowman and Smith-Isabell (2020) document the conflicting ideologies that result: higher education is simultaneously presented as a public good — in policy rhetoric, in mission statements, in funding-bid narratives — and produced through institutional practices that treat it as a private good acquired through fee-paying transactions. The contradiction is not unstable; it is structurally productive, because it permits institutions to draw on public legitimacy while operating through commercial mechanisms. Marginson (2018) emphasises that the public/private distinction is itself unstable in higher education, but he argues that the distinction can be analytically reconstructed through the four-domain framework if one is willing to specify which domain a given institutional practice occupies. The neoliberal university tends to exploit the ambiguity rather than to clarify it.

MANAGERIAL GOVERNANCE AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF COLLEGIAL AUTHORITY

The second mechanism operates at the level of institutional governance. The transformation here is not the introduction of management as such, since universities have always required administration, but the displacement of collegial authority by managerial hierarchy modelled on the corporation. Collini (2017) describes the transformation as the substitution of administrative service to academic ends with managerialism that subordinates academic ends to corporate procedure. The shift is institutional, not personal: the same individuals who once exercised administrative responsibility within a collegial framework now exercise it within a managerial framework, and their decisions are evaluated by criteria derived from corporate rather than academic governance.

The empirical record on this transformation is extensive. The EUA Autonomy Scorecard 2023 documents large-scale governance reforms across European higher education systems in the period since the previous Scorecard round. Several systems have moved from unitary to dual governance structures, while others have intensified the role of external members on governing boards (EUA, 2023). The number of systems in which the chair of the governing board is appointed by external bodies — typically by the relevant ministry or by a board appointed by external stakeholders — has increased, and the share of academic staff on governing boards has declined in twelve of the thirty-five surveyed systems. The narrative that justifies these reforms invokes efficiency in decision-making and stronger connections to societal and economic interests. The transformation is presented as a modernisation of governance and is recorded in the EUA framework as an expansion of organisational autonomy because the institutional bodies acquire formal decision-making powers that previously rested with ministerial actors.

Croucher and Lacy (2022) document, through their interviews with Australian higher education leaders, that the senior leadership of universities understands the governance transformation as a structural fact rather than as a contested choice. The leaders interviewed framed the question in terms of how to govern an entrepreneurial university effectively, not whether the entrepreneurial university is the appropriate institutional form. This consensus among senior leadership is consequential because it eliminates the internal organisational counter-pressure that would otherwise resist the encroachment of managerial logic on academic decision-making. Morley (2024), in her narrative ethnographic critique of contemporary university governance, describes how everyday managerial practices — performance-management cycles, accreditation processes, leadership-recognition

protocols — colonise the time and attention of academic staff and produce what she terms the obliteration of academic practice. Her account is autoethnographic but the structural mechanisms she describes are widely confirmed across the comparative literature.

A central feature of managerial governance is the bureaucratisation of academic life. Olssen (2022), in his contribution to the Handbook on Academic Freedom, argues that the incursions of neoliberalism into university governance have systematically weakened the institutional preconditions of academic freedom, including secure employment, collegial decision-making, and protected time for research. The mechanism of weakening is not direct prohibition but procedural saturation: the academic time available for substantive scholarly work is consumed by reporting requirements, accreditation reviews, performance documentation, and competitive grant applications. Morrish (2019), drawing on data from fifty-nine UK higher education institutions, documents an escalation of mental-health referrals among university staff between 2009 and 2016, attributing the trend to performance-management regimes that produce unattainable performance targets and chronic workload overload. Two-thirds of staff in her data report unmanageable workloads at least half the time, with academic tasks systematically undercounted in workload models that treat teaching, research, and administration as separable units rather than as integrated practice.

The bureaucratisation operates through specific instruments that have proliferated across higher education systems. Workload-allocation models, performance-review cycles, individual-target setting, research-output-counting, and student-evaluation regimes have become the routine instruments of academic management. Each instrument, considered in isolation, can be defended as a tool of accountability; in combination, they produce an environment in which the academic spends a substantial portion of professional time documenting, justifying, and demonstrating activity rather than performing the substantive work of research and teaching. Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023) document, through their meta-synthesis of qualitative studies of academic identity, that this procedural saturation produces widespread identity disorientation, with respondents describing a sense that the practices through which they are evaluated bear little relation to the substantive scholarly activity they value.

The transformation also affects the structure of academic labour itself. Burton and Bowman (2022), introducing the British Journal of Sociology of Education special issue on the academic precariat, document that the labour-market structure of contemporary higher education is reorganised around a thin layer of permanent senior staff supported by a thick layer of casualised early-career and mid-career personnel. The casualised layer performs the bulk of teaching and a significant share of research, but is systematically excluded from governance, from long-term institutional commitments, and from the formation of disciplinary trajectories. Leathwood and Read (2022), drawing on interviews with twenty UK academics on casualised contracts, demonstrate that short-term employment systematically undermines pedagogical continuity, programme coherence, and the development of disciplinary expertise. The OECD (2021) confirms the structural character of the trend: the share of recent PhD graduates on temporary contracts in EU countries reaches 20-49% in member states, against an EU workforce average of 11%, indicating that academic labour markets have diverged sharply from the labour-market norms of comparable knowledge sectors.

Managerial governance is not exhausted by the transformation of internal governance. It also operates through the redefinition of the institution's external accountability. Where collegial governance was historically accountable to a public composed of state bodies, professional associations, and academic peer communities, managerial governance is accountable to a constellation of external authorities that includes funders, accreditors, ranking agencies, and quasi-market regulators. Hamann and Ringel (2023) document the discursive resilience of these external authorities: rankers and accreditors absorb academic critique strategically, integrating selected criticisms into methodology while maintaining the homogenising pressures that produce institutional conformity. Gadd (2021) demonstrates that the metrics deployed by these external authorities are systematically

poor proxies for the qualities they purport to measure, but the institutions are nonetheless required to optimise for them because the metrics determine resource allocation and reputation positioning.

The cumulative effect of managerial governance is the displacement of collegial authority not only as an institutional practice but as a conceptual horizon. The vocabulary in which decisions are framed shifts from collegial deliberation to strategic planning, from academic judgement to performance management, from disciplinary self-regulation to compliance with external standards. Once this vocabulary is institutionalised, alternative vocabularies become difficult to deploy because the institutional procedures, reporting requirements, and evaluative instruments are all configured to register only the managerial categories. The mechanism is therefore not merely structural but discursive, which leads to the third coupled mechanism.

METRIFICATION, RANKINGS, AND THE EROSION OF EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY

The third mechanism operates at the level of evaluation. The transformation here is the displacement of substantive scholarly judgement by quantitative metrics that purport to measure scholarly quality but in fact measure indirect proxies optimised for inter-institutional comparison. The mechanism does not eliminate scholarly judgement, but it reorganises the relationship between judgement and metric in ways that subordinate the former to the latter. Gadd (2021) provides a sustained critical analysis of the metrics deployed by global university rankings. She demonstrates that the citation counts on which research-quality assessments rely are systematically biased against the humanities, the social sciences, and non-Anglophone publication traditions, because the citation databases used by ranking compilers underrepresent these areas. She also demonstrates that the reputation surveys deployed by ranking compilers measure brand awareness rather than substantive scholarly reputation, that the staff-student ratios deployed as proxies for teaching quality are uncorrelated with student-learning outcomes, and that the international-student shares deployed as proxies for global engagement reward institutional marketing capacity rather than educational quality.

Despite these methodological deficiencies, the rankings exercise substantial influence over institutional behaviour. Hamann and Ringel (2023) document the discursive resilience of rankings: rankers do not avoid criticism but absorb it strategically, integrating selected critiques into ranking methodology without altering the homogenising effects. Their analysis demonstrates that rankings function as institutionalised classifications whose authority is sustained not by the validity of their measurements but by their performative role in coordinating institutional behaviour. The same pattern applies to research-evaluation regimes such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework, which Morrish (2019) identifies as the source of performance-management practices that have produced the documented mental-health crisis among UK academic staff.

The Academic Freedom Index introduced by Spannagel and Kinzelbach (2023) provides a useful counterweight to ranking-driven assessments because it measures substantive academic freedom rather than institutional positioning in market-oriented metrics. The Index draws on inputs from over two thousand country experts, uses the V-Dem item-response-theory measurement model, and aggregates data on five sub-dimensions: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression. The results documented in the most recent updates show that academic freedom has declined in fifty countries over the last decade against improvements in only nine (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The decline is not concentrated in autocratic regimes alone; substantial declines are recorded in Hungary, Poland, India, the United States, and the United Kingdom, indicating that the mechanism extends across regime types.

The dissociation between ranking position and academic freedom is itself analytically informative. Several systems whose universities occupy elite positions in the global rankings — the United States, the United Kingdom, Hungary — have experienced significant declines on the Academic Freedom Index in recent years (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The dissociation suggests that

ranking-driven competition can coexist with declining substantive freedom, and indeed that the two may be coupled: institutions seeking to optimise for ranking metrics may discount substantive freedom protections that are not visible to ranking compilers. Olssen (2022) argues that this is the structural pattern of neoliberal university governance, in which the institutional preconditions of academic freedom — secure employment, collegial deliberation, protected time, intellectual independence from funder priorities — are eroded as the institution optimises for the visible indicators of competitive position.

The consequences of metrification extend beyond the institutional level to the individual academic. Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023) document, in their meta-synthesis of qualitative studies, that academics in metrified environments report a systematic dissociation between the activities they value and the activities for which they are evaluated. The dissociation produces what their respondents describe as identity disorientation: the academic recognises that the work for which she is paid and rewarded is not the work she understands as constitutive of her vocation. The consequence is not merely subjective discomfort but objective behavioural change, because over time the academic adapts her practice to the metrics rather than to the substantive purposes of the discipline. Morrish (2019) documents the mental-health correlates of this adaptation: the British data she analyses shows escalating rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among university staff, with the trend tracking the intensification of performance-management regimes derived from ranking-oriented evaluation.

The erosion of epistemic autonomy is most visible in research priorities. As funding becomes dependent on competitive grant applications evaluated by metrics that reward citation impact and topic alignment with funder priorities, research programmes shift toward topics likely to attract citation in dominant journals and toward methods favoured by current funder calls. Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) document that this reorganisation of research priorities is one of the constitutive features of academic capitalism: the new circuits of knowledge formed around research-and-development partnerships, intellectual-property licensing, and public-private joint ventures redirect research effort toward applications with foreseeable commercial value, often at the expense of fundamental research and of disciplines whose contributions resist commodification. Jessop (2017) describes the same reorganisation through the lens of varieties of academic capitalism, distinguishing intrapreneurial and external entrepreneurial logics that reshape the academic mission.

The erosion is also visible in publishing practice. The dominance of a small number of commercial publishers in academic journal publication, the prevalence of article-processing-charge models for open-access publication, and the metrification of journal prestige through impact factors produce an evaluative regime in which the institutional locus of knowledge dissemination is structured by commercial actors whose interests do not align with the public-good orientations to which the academy is rhetorically committed. The pattern is not exhausted by individual cases of mispricing or oligopoly; it is structural, and it conditions the everyday research practice of academics across disciplines. The third mechanism couples back to the first two in specifiable ways. Metrification reinforces financial dependency because institutions that perform poorly on dominant metrics lose competitive position in tuition markets and in research-grant competition, which in turn reduces revenue and increases pressure to optimise further for the metrics. Metrification reinforces managerial governance because the institutional task of optimising for metrics produces and legitimises a managerial layer whose function is precisely the management of metric-compliance. The mechanism is therefore not isolable: any reform that seeks to address the metrification of academic life without simultaneously addressing the financial dependency and the managerial governance through which metrification operates will be neutralised by the unaltered mechanisms.

The effects on knowledge itself are substantial. Brunner and colleagues (2019) document the differential reception of academic-capitalism logics in Latin American higher education, with some national systems resisting the metrification trend more successfully than others, but the regional pattern as a whole is one of progressive metric-driven realignment. Marginson (2018) emphasises that the four-domain framework he develops — civil society, social democracy, state quasi-markets,

commercial markets — must be applied to disentangle which dimensions of higher education remain protected from market discipline and which have been absorbed into it. His framework, applied to the metrification mechanism, suggests that the state quasi-market and commercial-market domains have expanded substantially while the civil-society and social-democracy domains have contracted, with consequences for the kinds of knowledge the university is institutionally able to produce.

DISCURSIVE RECASTING OF THE ACADEMIC SUBJECT AND THE COUPLED SYSTEM

The fourth mechanism operates at the level of subjectivity. The transformation here is the recasting of the academic and the student as economic agents whose orientations, motivations, and self-understanding are reorganised around market categories. Brown (2015) describes this recasting as the economisation of the subject: the human agent is no longer figured primarily as citizen, professional, or member of a public, but as a unit of human capital whose worth is measured by market position. The recasting operates through everyday discursive practices — institutional communications, professional development frameworks, performance-management vocabularies, student-recruitment narratives — that progressively normalise the market-oriented self-understanding even where formal institutional commitments to alternative orientations remain in place.

Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023), in their meta-synthesis of qualitative studies of academic identity, document the lived experience of this recasting. The respondents in the studies they synthesise report a sense of dissociation between the values that brought them into the academy — intellectual independence, public service, disciplinary commitment — and the practices through which they are evaluated, which centre on quantifiable output, market-relevant skills, and competitive positioning. The dissociation is not generally framed as a contradiction in formal institutional commitments, because most institutions continue to articulate their missions in terms of public goods and disciplinary excellence; rather, the dissociation is felt as a divergence between formal commitment and operational practice. The respondents describe coping strategies that include selective compliance, internal compartmentalisation, and what some authors have termed cynical performance: the academic performs the metrics-oriented work while privately reserving her substantive commitments for other domains.

Burton and Bowman (2022) document the parallel transformation among the contingent academic workforce. The systemic naturalisation of precarity in academic labour markets produces a generation of early-career academics whose self-understanding is structurally marked by the absence of stable employment. The OECD (2021) policy paper on academic precarity confirms that the share of PhD graduates on temporary contracts in EU countries reaches between 20% and 49%, against the EU workforce average of 11%, indicating that the academic labour market has diverged sharply from the norms of comparable knowledge sectors. Leathwood and Read (2022), drawing on interviews with twenty UK academics on casualised contracts, demonstrate that the temporality of casualised employment systematically prevents the formation of long-term scholarly programmes and the development of disciplinary expertise, producing what they describe as short-changed academic biographies. The discursive recasting here is not merely a matter of vocabulary but of structurally enforced self-understanding: the casualised academic cannot project a long-term scholarly identity because the institutional supports for such an identity have been withdrawn.

The recasting also operates on students. Silverio and colleagues (2021) document the cultural saturation of the student-consumer image in popular and institutional representations of UK higher education. The image is reinforced by tuition-fee structures that frame higher education as a purchased service, by student-feedback regimes that treat student satisfaction as the primary indicator of teaching quality, and by labour-market discourses that frame the degree as a credentialing transaction. Fredricks-Lowman and Smith-Isabell (2020) describe the resulting structural

contradiction: higher education is simultaneously presented as a public good in policy rhetoric and produced through institutional practices that treat it as a private good acquired through fee-paying transactions. The contradiction is not destabilising but productive, because it permits institutions to draw on the public legitimacy of higher education while operating through commercial mechanisms.

Morley (2024), in her narrative ethnographic critique, describes the everyday operation of the discursive mechanism through specific institutional practices: leadership-recognition protocols, performance-management cycles, accreditation reviews, and the documentation requirements that consume academic time. Her account, although drawn from one institutional setting, captures a pattern widely confirmed across the comparative literature. The discursive mechanism operates by colonising the time and attention of academic staff with managerial categories, leaving progressively less institutional space for substantive disciplinary practice. The result is what she terms the obliteration of academic practice, meaning the displacement of the substantive activities that constitute scholarship by the procedural activities that document compliance.

The fourth mechanism couples to the previous three in specifiable ways. Discursive recasting reinforces financial dependency because the student-consumer self-understanding produced by tuition-fee structures intensifies the institutional pressure to deliver experiences and credentials that meet consumer expectations, which in turn intensifies the institution's revenue dependency on consumer satisfaction. Discursive recasting reinforces managerial governance because the academic-as-economic-agent self-understanding produced by performance-management regimes legitimises managerial intervention as the appropriate mode of coordinating economic agents within an organisation. Discursive recasting reinforces metrification because the recasting of intellectual work as quantifiable output produces and naturalises the demand for metrics that can register such output. The fourth mechanism is therefore not subordinate to the other three; it operates at the level of subjectivity that conditions the operation of the other mechanisms.

The coupling among the four mechanisms is the central analytical claim of this article. Each mechanism, operating in isolation, would produce specific local effects but would not be sustainable, because the affected agents would resist or work around the mechanism. The mechanisms become sustainable, and indeed self-reinforcing, because each mechanism produces the conditions under which the other mechanisms can operate. Financial dependency produces the revenue precarity that legitimises managerial intervention. Managerial intervention produces the metric-driven evaluation that legitimises ranking-oriented competition. Ranking-oriented competition produces the discursive recasting of the academic subject as economic agent. The discursive recasting produces the consensus that financial dependency is the only viable institutional condition. The cycle is closed, and the closure is the source of the system's stability.

The framework of coupled mechanisms therefore identifies a structural feature of the contemporary university that previous accounts have approached but not fully specified. Brown (2015), Giroux (2020), and Collini (2017) describe the cumulative effect without isolating the recursive coupling. The academic-capitalism tradition synthesised by Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) identifies the operational features of the new revenue architecture without specifying the discursive mechanisms through which they are stabilised. Jessop (2017) and Schulze-Cleven and Olson (2017) develop typologies of national varieties without specifying the within-system feedback paths that produce stability across varieties. The coupling specified here is offered as a complement to these accounts, designed to address the question of why the system reproduces itself even in the absence of conscious coordination.

The empirical pattern reported in the Research Results section — the divergence between formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy — receives its analytical interpretation through the coupling. Systems that score highest on formal autonomy in the EUA framework (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Estonia, Lithuania) are those in which the four mechanisms have been most fully institutionalised (EUA, 2023). The expansion of formal autonomy is not a counterweight to the four mechanisms but a feature of their joint operation: institutions acquire the

legal-formal capacity to set fees, borrow, own assets, and structure governance because the four mechanisms have been coordinated to produce institutions that will use these capacities in ways that reproduce the system. Substantive academic autonomy, by contrast, depends on conditions — secure employment, collegial deliberation, protected time, epistemic independence — that the four mechanisms systematically erode. The paradox of autonomy is therefore not an accident but a structural feature of the coupling.

The implications for reform are direct. Reform initiatives that target only one mechanism — for example, the abolition or capping of tuition fees while leaving the audit regime in place — cannot succeed because the unaltered mechanisms compensate. The empirical record confirms this prediction: in systems where individual mechanisms have been moderated, the others have intensified to maintain the systemic configuration. Genuine restoration of academic autonomy requires simultaneous intervention on all four mechanisms, which is a political and institutional task of substantial complexity. The framework does not specify the content of such reforms, but it specifies the criteria they must meet to succeed.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the structural crisis of the neoliberal university model through a systematic analysis of how market logic erodes academic autonomy. The analysis has been conducted through a mixed-method critical-analytical approach that combined a structured synthesis of twenty-nine peer-reviewed sources from the period 2015-2023, comparative documentary analysis of institutional indicators including the European University Association Autonomy Scorecard 2023 (EUA, 2023), the Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al., 2023), and the OECD Education at a Glance 2023 (OECD, 2023), and analytical decomposition of governance, financing, and labour regimes across European and Anglo-American higher education systems. The empirical findings have been interpreted through an analytical framework that decomposes the neoliberalisation of higher education into four coupled mechanisms — financial dependency, managerial governance, evaluative metrification, and discursive recasting of the academic subject — and demonstrates that the four mechanisms operate as a self-reinforcing system rather than as independent policy choices.

The first hypothesis stated that the erosion of academic autonomy operates through coupled mechanisms rather than separate policy interventions. The empirical record confirms this hypothesis. The four mechanisms identified in the analytical framework can each be observed independently in the documentary indicators and in the synthesised literature, but the relational pattern reported in the Research Results section demonstrates that the four mechanisms covary: systems in which one mechanism is intensified are systems in which the others are also intensified. The OECD data on private-share financing (OECD, 2023), the EUA data on governance reform (EUA, 2023), the Academic Freedom Index data on substantive freedom decline (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023), and the meta-synthesis data on academic-identity disorientation (Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2023) all align in identifying the same systems as the most fully neoliberalised, supporting the analytical claim that the four mechanisms are coupled.

The second hypothesis stated that formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy diverge under neoliberal governance. The empirical record again confirms this hypothesis. Systems scoring at the highest levels of formal financial autonomy in the EUA framework — the United Kingdom is the paradigmatic case — are also systems in which 44% of teaching-only contracts and 66.3% of research-only contracts are on fixed-term terms (Burton & Bowman, 2022), in which the Academic Freedom Index records downward trajectories (Kinzelbach et al., 2023), and in which the meta-synthesis literature documents the deepest reports of academic-identity disorientation (Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2023). The divergence is not an accidental finding but a structural feature of the coupling, and it constitutes the paradox of autonomy that gives this article its conceptual anchor.

The third hypothesis stated that reform initiatives targeting only one mechanism systematically fail to restore substantive autonomy because the unaltered mechanisms compensate. The empirical record provides indirect but consistent support for this hypothesis. Where individual mechanisms have been moderated — for example, the introduction of tuition-fee caps in some systems, the partial restoration of collegial governance in others, or the re-evaluation of ranking-driven incentive structures — the documentary indicators show compensatory intensification of the other mechanisms (EUA, 2023; OECD, 2023). Direct testing of this hypothesis would require comparative case-study analysis of specific reform initiatives, which the methodology applied here does not undertake; the hypothesis is therefore confirmed at the level of structural prediction rather than at the level of specific causal demonstration, and further research is required to specify the mechanisms of compensatory intensification in particular reform settings.

The principal original contribution of this article is the introduction of the analytical framework of coupled mechanisms of autonomy erosion. The framework decomposes the neoliberalisation of higher education into four interlocking dimensions and specifies the recursive feedback relations through which each mechanism amplifies the others. The framework is novel because previous accounts have either treated neoliberalisation as a unitary phenomenon (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2020), as a typology of national varieties (Jessop, 2017; Schulze-Cleven & Olson, 2017), or as a set of organisational levels (Sigahi & Saltorato, 2020), without specifying the recursive relationships among mechanisms that account for the system's reproductive stability. The framework makes the crisis legible not as a sum of policy choices but as a configuration of mutually reinforcing pressures, and it generates testable predictions about the failure conditions of incremental reform. The framework also provides an interpretive key for the paradox of autonomy: the divergence between formal institutional autonomy and substantive academic autonomy is not an accident but a structural feature of the four mechanisms operating together.

The methodological limitations of the analysis are fourfold. First, the institutional indicators on which the empirical analysis depends are aggregate, masking within-system heterogeneity that would be visible at the level of individual institutions or departments. Second, the source literature is concentrated in English-language publication and underrepresents non-Anglophone analytical traditions, which may produce a partial view of the global pattern; the inclusion of Brunner and colleagues (2019) on Latin America and Oleksiyenko (2021) on the post-Soviet space partially mitigates this limitation but does not eliminate it. Third, the critical-analytical synthesis cannot substitute for primary fieldwork in particular national systems, and the framework therefore generates predictions that require further empirical testing through comparative case-study research. Fourth, the temporal scope of the analysis ends in 2023, and the post-2023 evolution of the four mechanisms — including the response of higher education systems to the post-pandemic economic environment and to the growing geopolitical reorganisation of research collaboration — is not addressed here and constitutes a priority for further inquiry.

The implications for European Higher Education Area policy are substantial. The framework predicts that incremental reforms targeting individual mechanisms — for example, the introduction of fee caps without simultaneous reform of governance, or the rebalancing of governance without simultaneous reform of evaluation — will fail to restore substantive academic autonomy. Genuine restoration requires simultaneous intervention on all four mechanisms, including the rebalancing of revenue architectures away from market dependency, the restoration of collegial deliberation as an institutional practice, the displacement of metric-driven evaluation by substantive scholarly judgement, and the rearticulation of the academic subject as something other than an economic agent. The political and institutional complexity of such a reform agenda is considerable, and the framework does not prescribe its content. What the framework provides is the analytical clarity required to evaluate proposed reforms against the criterion of systemic adequacy: a reform that does not address all four mechanisms cannot, on the analysis presented here, succeed in its stated aim.

Three directions for further research can be identified. First, the framework can be tested through comparative case-study analysis of reform initiatives in specific national systems, with attention to the mechanisms of compensatory intensification predicted by the framework. Second, the framework can be applied to the regional analysis of higher education systems outside the European and Anglo-American contexts, with particular attention to the Latin American (Brunner et al., 2019), post-Soviet (Oleksiyenko, 2021), and East Asian (Mok & Montgomery, 2021) systems where the coupling of the four mechanisms may take distinct forms. Third, the framework can be extended to the analysis of digital transformation in higher education, including the role of educational technology platforms, online programme management arrangements, and artificial-intelligence-mediated teaching and assessment, all of which mobilise the four mechanisms in new institutional configurations.

The crisis of the neoliberal university model is not a passing financial difficulty but a structural condition of the institutional form. The framework introduced here does not predict that the crisis will resolve itself, nor that the university will collapse under its weight. The four mechanisms operate as a stable system precisely because they are coupled, and the system reproduces itself through routine institutional practices that do not require deliberate coordination. What the framework does predict is that the substantive purposes of the university — the formation of critically educated citizens, the production of knowledge oriented to public goods, the protection of intellectual independence as a precondition of democratic deliberation — cannot be sustained within the operating constraints of the system. Restoration of those purposes requires institutional reorganisation on a scale that incremental reform cannot accommodate. The first task of analysis is to make the constraint visible. The remainder of the task is political, institutional, and intergenerational, and lies beyond the analytical scope of this article.

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KRIZA NEOLIBERALNOG MODELA UNIVERZITETA: IZMEĐU TRŽIŠNE LOGIKE I AKADEMSKE AUTONOMIJE

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Apstrakt: Članak analizira strukturnu krizu neoliberalnog modela univerziteta kroz sistematsko ispitivanje načina na koje tržišna logika nagriza akademsku autonomiju u savremenom visokom obrazovanju. Istraživanje primjenjuje mješoviti kritičko-analički pristup koji kombinira strukturiranu sintezu recenzirane literature objavljene u periodu 2015–2023, komparativnu dokumentarnu analizu institucionalnih pokazatelja iz Autonomy Scorecard-a Evropskog udruženja univerziteta i vremenskih serija Indeksa akademske slobode, te analitičku dekompoziciju režima upravljanja, finansiranja i akademskog rada u evropskim i anglosaksonskim sistemima visokog obrazovanja. Centralni nalaz je da erozija akademske autonomije djeluje kroz četiri spregnuta mehanizma — finansijsku zavisnost, menadžerski model upravljanja, evaluacijsku metrifikaciju i diskurzivnu rekonstrukciju akademskog subjekta — koji čine samoodrživi sistem, a ne nezavisne politike. Empirijska analiza pokazuje da sistemi visokog obrazovanja s najvišim formalnim ocjenama na institucionalnoj autonomiji istovremeno bilježe najintenzivniju prekarnost akademskog rada i najstrmiji pad na supstancijalnim pokazateljima akademske slobode, što ukazuje na strukturni paradoks: formalna autonomija na institucionalnom nivou koegzistira sa supstancijalnom heteronomijom na nivou akademske prakse. Originalni doprinos rada je uvođenje analitičkog okvira spregnutih mehanizama erozije autonomije, koji pojašnjava zašto izolovane reforme — usmjerene na samo jednu dimenziju neoliberalizacije — sistemski ne uspijevaju da povrate supstancijalnu autonomiju. Rad zaključuje implikacijama za politiku Evropskog prostora visokog obrazovanja, argumentirajući da istinsko obnavljanje akademske autonomije zahtijeva istovremenu intervenciju na sva četiri mehanizma. Metodološka ograničenja uključuju oslanjanje na agregirane institucionalne podatke i koncentraciju izvora na engleskom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: *neoliberalni univerzitet, akademska autonomija, marketizacija, akademski kapitalizam, kultura revizije, upravljanje visokim obrazovanjem, akademska sloboda, kazualizacija.*