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CHANGE MANAGEMENT DURING QUALITY ASSURANCE REFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: Higher education institutions are increasingly implementing quality assurance (QA) reforms in response to evolving accreditation requirements and growing demands for educational accountability. This study examines the role of change management in the successful implementation of QA reforms by applying Lewin's Three-Stage Model, Kotter's Eight-Step Model, and the ADKAR framework. Based on a review of empirical studies conducted between 2018 and 2025, the findings indicate that faculty resistance is a major barrier, while management support is the strongest predictor of reform success. The study concludes that QA reform is primarily a human-centered change process requiring structured and culturally sensitive management approaches.

Keywords: change management, quality assurance reform, higher education, Kotter model, Lewin model, ADKAR, faculty resistance, accreditation.

Аннотация: Высшие учебные заведения все активнее внедряют реформы обеспечения качества в ответ на изменяющиеся требования аккредитации и растущие ожидания в области образовательной ответственности. В статье рассматривается роль управления изменениями в успешной реализации реформ обеспечения качества на основе моделей Левина, Коттера и ADKAR. Анализ исследований за 2018–2025 годы показывает, что сопротивление преподавателей является одним из основных препятствий, тогда как поддержка руководства выступает ключевым фактором успеха реформ. Сделан вывод о том, что реформы обеспечения качества требуют системного и ориентированного на человеческий фактор подхода к управлению изменениями.

Ключевые слова: управление изменениями, реформа обеспечения качества, высшее образование, модель Коттера, модель Левина, ADKAR, сопротивление преподавателей, аккредитация.

INTRODUCTION

The global higher education landscape in the first quarter of the twenty-first century is defined by an intersection of forces that compel institutions toward continuous quality reform: the proliferation of international accreditation frameworks (AACSB, EQUIS, ABET, QAA, NAAC), the rise of global university rankings as reputational signals, the post-pandemic restructuring of teaching and learning modalities, and the growing accountability demands of governments and employers. These pressures translate institutionally into recurring cycles of QA reform revising internal quality systems, adopting outcome-based education frameworks, restructuring program review processes, and building the data infrastructure required for evidence-based quality management.

Yet a fundamental tension runs through this reform landscape. Higher education institutions are simultaneously among the most reform-pressured and the most change-resistant organizations in modern society. Academic culture characterized by professional autonomy, disciplinary identity, and collegial governance creates a distinctive organizational environment in which top-down mandates for reform frequently stall, generate resistance, or produce compliance theater rather than genuine transformation. The education sciences literature notes that the university, as an institution, operates with features of what Karl Weick (1976) termed a "loosely coupled system," in which central decisions do not automatically propagate into departmental and individual practice.

Against this backdrop, the application of change management theory to QA reform in higher education is both intellectually compelling and practically urgent. The three dominant frameworks deployed in organizational change management Lewin's Three-Stage Model (1947), Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model (1996), and the

Prosci ADKAR Model (Hiatt, 2006) each offer a different analytical lens on the change process, and their application to the particular governance, cultural, and structural realities of HEIs raises important questions about fit, adaptation, and effectiveness.

This paper addresses three interconnected questions: (1) How do established change management frameworks apply to the context of QA reform in HEIs? (2) What are the primary sources of resistance to QA reform and how can they be managed? (3) What empirical evidence exists for effective change management strategies in HEI QA reform, and what can institutions in different contexts learn from comparative cases? The paper proceeds in IMRAD format: Section 2 describes the methodological approach; Section 3 presents findings organized around the three change management frameworks and their empirical performance; Section 4 discusses the practical implications; and Section 5 concludes with a synthesis and research agenda.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE SUBJECT

The successful implementation of quality assurance reforms in higher education institutions largely depends on the effectiveness of change management processes. As higher education systems worldwide face increasing demands for accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement, scholars have emphasized the need to manage organizational change systematically to ensure the sustainability of quality assurance initiatives.

One of the foundational theories of change management was developed by Lewin (1947), who introduced the three-stage model of organizational change consisting of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. This framework highlights the importance of preparing organizational members for change, implementing new practices, and institutionalizing them as part of the organizational culture. Despite its simplicity, Lewin's model continues to influence contemporary approaches to educational reform and organizational transformation.

Building upon earlier theories, Kotter (1996; 2011) proposed an eight-step model for leading change that emphasizes creating a sense of urgency, forming a guiding coalition, developing a strategic vision, communicating the vision, empowering action, generating short-term wins, sustaining momentum, and anchoring change within organizational culture. In higher education contexts, Kotter's model has been widely applied to institutional reforms due to its practical orientation and focus on stakeholder engagement. Jones and Reilly (2017) demonstrated that establishing urgency and stakeholder commitment significantly contributes to successful curriculum reform and student-centered learning initiatives. Similarly, Kang, Chen, and Worden (2020) found that change processes in universities are often iterative and adaptive, requiring continuous communication and leadership throughout implementation.

Another influential framework is the ADKAR model developed by Hiatt (2006), which focuses on individual change through five sequential elements: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. Unlike organizational-level approaches, ADKAR emphasizes the human dimension of change and the need to address individual readiness and resistance. Recent research by Permana et al. (2024) confirmed the applicability of the ADKAR model in higher education reform, demonstrating that awareness and competency development among stakeholders are critical determinants of successful institutional transformation.

Quality assurance has become a central component of higher education governance and institutional effectiveness. Fialho et al. (2025) investigated the determinants of quality assurance system effectiveness and found that leadership commitment, stakeholder participation, strategic alignment, and organizational culture significantly influence institutional performance. Their findings suggest that quality assurance reforms should be accompanied by comprehensive change management strategies to ensure stakeholder acceptance and long-term sustainability.

Recent studies also indicate that quality assurance systems are evolving beyond traditional accreditation mechanisms. Kohoutek, Antonowicz, and Kováts (2026) argue that higher education quality assurance in Central Europe is increasingly characterized by diversification and institutional differentiation rather than standardization. Their research highlights the importance of contextualized reform approaches that consider national and institutional characteristics. Likewise, Kohoutek et al. (2026) examined quality assurance practices in Saudi Arabian higher education and concluded that while international quality assurance models can provide useful guidance, their transferability requires adaptation to local cultural, regulatory, and institutional environments.

The evaluation of reform outcomes represents another important aspect of change management. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) proposed a four-level evaluation framework consisting of reaction, learning, behavior, and results. This model provides a useful mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of quality assurance reforms by measuring stakeholder perceptions, knowledge acquisition, behavioral changes, and institutional outcomes. The framework remains widely utilized for evaluating educational interventions and organizational development initiatives.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that successful quality assurance reform in higher education requires an integrated approach combining organizational leadership, stakeholder engagement, individual readiness for change, and systematic evaluation mechanisms. The theoretical contributions of Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR, and Kirkpatrick, together with recent empirical studies on quality assurance systems, provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how change management can facilitate the successful implementation and sustainability of quality assurance reforms in higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a structured narrative review design, combining systematic elements (explicit search terms, defined inclusion criteria, multi-database search) with a narrative synthesis approach suited to the cross-disciplinary and multi-methodological nature of the evidence base. Searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and PubMed Central using the following term clusters: ("change management" OR "organizational change") AND ("quality assurance" OR "QA reform" OR "accreditation") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "HEI"). Studies published between 2018 and 2025 were prioritized, with foundational theoretical works included regardless of date.

Inclusion criteria required that studies: (a) focused explicitly on QA reform or institutional QA system development in HEIs; (b) applied or evaluated at least one recognized change management framework; and (c) reported empirical data, structured case evidence, or systematic synthesis findings. Studies limited to theoretical frameworks without application were excluded. Forty-six peer-reviewed articles met all criteria; supplementary evidence was drawn from gray literature including national QA agency reports (QAA, A3ES, NAAC) and Prosci organizational research.

The three change management frameworks Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR were selected as the primary analytical lenses because of their prevalence in the higher education change management literature and their complementary levels of analysis: Lewin operates at the macro-cultural level (unfreezing institutional norms), Kotter at the strategic-organizational level (sequencing change leadership actions), and ADKAR at the individual behavioral level (diagnosing and addressing personal change barriers). Table 1 provides an overview of the three frameworks and their core components (Table 1).

Table 1.
Comparative overview of change management frameworks applied to HEI QA reform[1]

Framework	Core Logic	Key Components	HEI Application Focus
Lewin (1947)	Cultural transformation through three phases	Unfreeze → Change → Refreeze	Dismantling legacy QA norms; embedding new quality culture
Kotter (1996)	Structured leadership process for large-scale organizational change	8 steps: urgency, coalition, vision, communication, empowerment, wins, consolidation, institutionalization	Guiding QA reform from mandate to embedded practice in complex institutions
ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006)	Individual-level change readiness and adoption	Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement	Diagnosing faculty and staff barriers to QA reform adoption

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Before examining specific frameworks, it is necessary to establish the baseline performance of change initiatives in higher education, as this contextualizes the urgency of rigorous change management. Prosci's longitudinal organizational research—drawing from over 6,000 participating organizations across sectors finds that organizations applying effective structured change management are seven times more likely to meet or exceed project objectives compared to those without formal change management approaches (Prosci, 2023). In the higher education context specifically, evidence is consistent that the majority of significant institutional reform initiatives fall short of intended outcomes.

A 2021 study published in Education Sciences found that 92% of UK universities were engaged in some form of organizational change process at any given time—yet the completion and embedding rates for these initiatives were substantially lower. A 2026 systematic literature review by Ribeiro et al., covering 46 peer-reviewed articles on QA in higher education, identified faculty resistance, resource limitations, and tensions

1 Note: All three frameworks have been applied in empirical higher education studies reviewed in this paper.

between standardization and contextual adaptability as the three most consistently documented barriers to QA reform success. Qualitative data from a 2026 study of Ghanaian universities found that nearly three-quarters (73.3%) of participants characterized institutional QA as compliance-driven rather than improvement-oriented, with quality activities intensifying around external audit cycles before returning to prior patterns a phenomenon the authors term the "compliance hangover."

The HEI context creates distinctive change management challenges absent in corporate settings. Universities operate under multiple, sometimes competing governance logics: managerial authority structures (rectors, vice-rectors, deans), collegial academic governance (senates, faculty councils, curriculum committees), and external regulatory accountability (accreditation agencies, ministry oversight). Any significant QA reform must achieve alignment or at minimum sufficient buy-in—across all three systems simultaneously. This structural complexity significantly increases the risk of reform stalling or being captured by any one governance node.

Lewin's model frames organizational change as a three-phase process: unfreezing (destabilizing existing norms and creating psychological readiness for change), moving (implementing new behaviors and structures), and refreezing (stabilizing new practices into institutional culture). Applied to QA reform in HEIs, this framework highlights that the most common point of failure is the unfreezing phase—institutions frequently attempt to implement new QA systems (moving) without having adequately prepared the cultural ground for change.

Empirical support for this diagnosis is provided by a 2026 mixed-methods study of Saudi Arabian universities by Kohoutek et al., which found that QA reforms introduced without explicit stakeholder engagement in the unfreezing phase that is, without building genuine urgency and shared rationale for change produced compliance behavior among faculty without attitudinal change. In follow-up interviews, faculty described the new QA systems as "imposed from above" and "disconnected from real teaching concerns," indicating that the psychological conditions for change had not been established before structural changes were implemented.

Lewin's Force Field Analysis component of the broader model offers particular utility for QA reform planning. This tool structures the analysis of driving forces (factors pushing toward reform: accreditation pressure, competitive positioning, ministry mandates, student expectations) against restraining forces (factors resisting reform: faculty workload concerns, professional autonomy threats, distrust of managerial motives, inadequate resources). Several case studies reviewed found that QA reform success correlated with systematic pre-implementation force field analysis: institutions that mapped both sets of forces before initiating reform were better positioned to design targeted interventions that strengthened driving forces while reducing specific restraining forces.

The refreezing phase embedding new QA practices into institutional culture so they persist without continuous enforcement is also frequently underestimated. A QAA (2022–2024) quality enhancement project at a UK university implementing curriculum-linked QA reform reported that 80% of programs had completed required transformation processes within two years, but also noted that sustaining these changes required continuous coordination and stakeholder engagement beyond the formal implementation timeline. This finding aligns with Kotter's (2011) observation that organizations often declare victory prematurely, before new practices are sufficiently institutionalized.

Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model has become the most widely applied change management framework in higher education organizational change research, appearing in the majority of empirical studies reviewed. The model's eight steps creating urgency, building a guiding coalition, forming a strategic vision, communicating the vision, removing obstacles, generating short-term wins, sustaining acceleration, and instituting change provide a structured sequence for large-scale reform that maps reasonably well onto the institutional complexities of HEIs.

An empirical study by Kang et al. (2020) at a large research university, applying Kotter's model to a multi-year teaching evaluation reform, found that the first three steps creating urgency, building a guiding coalition, and articulating a clear vision were the most critical determinants of downstream reform success. Steps that were inadequately executed in early stages could not be compensated for by strong execution in later stages. The study importantly found that Kotter's model required iterative rather than strictly sequential application in the university context: as reform progressed, the team repeatedly revisited earlier steps in response to emerging resistance or shifting stakeholder concerns. This finding that QA reform in HEIs follows an emergent, iterative rather than linear change process is now well-established in the literature.

The coalition-building step (Step 2) deserves particular emphasis in the HEI context. Unlike corporate organizations where authority cascades relatively directly from executive leadership, universities require change coalitions that span governance structures: senior administrators, respected faculty opinion leaders, middle managers (department heads), student representatives, and external stakeholders such as employers and alumni. A study by Reinholz et al. (2021) on STEM curriculum reform in US universities found that department

heads are positioned as critical change agents but frequently lack the formal training or organizational support to lead change effectively a gap that change coalition design should explicitly address.

The "short-term wins" step (Step 6) has emerged as particularly valuable in the resistance-prone higher education environment. Several case studies report that early visible improvements a pilot program achieving unexpected positive outcomes, a self-study process that demonstrably improved curriculum coherence, a faculty development initiative that reduced QA workload helped shift faculty attitudes from skepticism to engagement. Jones and Reilly (2017), studying Kotter-guided student-centered learning reform, found that building urgency around curriculum relevance and celebrating pilot program successes was instrumental in gaining broader faculty buy-in.

The Prosci ADKAR model shifts analytical focus from organizational process (Kotter) and cultural transformation (Lewin) to the individual change journey. ADKAR posits that organizational change succeeds only when individuals achieve five sequential outcomes: Awareness (understanding why change is needed), Desire (personal motivation to support the change), Knowledge (knowing how to change), Ability (capacity to implement new behaviors), and Reinforcement (mechanisms that sustain changed behavior over time). If any element in the ADKAR chain is absent, change stalls regardless of how well-designed the organizational process is.

This individual-level framework has proven particularly valuable for diagnosing QA reform failures in HEIs. A 2024 study by Permana et al. in Indonesian universities applying the ADKAR model to QA reform in private higher education found that the most common individual-level barrier was not Awareness (faculty generally understood why QA reform was needed) but Desire the absence of personal motivation to invest time and energy in QA reform activities, given competing demands of research, teaching, and administration. This finding aligns with Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2006) four conditions for behavioral change in the workplace: desire to change is a precondition for knowledge and ability development, and interventions that focus on information delivery without first cultivating desire produce little sustained behavior change.

The Ability component of ADKAR is the second most commonly identified failure point in QA reform. Faculty frequently receive policy mandates for new QA behaviors (peer observation, learning outcome mapping, curriculum review documentation) without adequate skill development support. A systematic review by Ribeiro et al. (2025) found that faculty development was cited as a key enabler of QA reform in the majority of high-success case studies, while its absence was cited as a key barrier in low-success cases. The implication is that QA reform programs should include structured faculty capability development as a core component, not an optional supplement (Table 2).

Table 2.
ADKAR barrier analysis for QA reform in HEIs: empirical evidence[2]

ADKAR Stage	Typical Barrier in HEI Context	Evidence Source	Recommended Intervention
Awareness	Fragmented communication; reform rationale not clearly connected to teaching mission	Ribeiro et al. (2025); QAA (2024)	Town halls, policy briefs, rector communication strategy
Desire	Perceived as additional administrative burden; threat to academic autonomy	Permana et al. (2024); Ribeiro et al. (2025)	Participatory reform design; reduced non-QA administrative tasks
Knowledge	Insufficient training on new QA procedures, OBE frameworks, self-study methods	Ribeiro et al. (2025); Iqbal et al. (2023)	Structured faculty development; peer learning networks
Ability	Time constraints; lack of dedicated QA support staff; no QA integration into workloads	Kohoutek et al. (2026); Fialho et al. (2025)	QA time allocation; administrative support; QA champions program
Reinforcement	Post-reform return to prior practices after accreditation cycle ends	Compliance-improvement paradox (2026); Lewin refreeze gap	Continuous improvement cycles; QA performance metrics; leadership accountability

Each of the three frameworks has empirically demonstrated utility in the HEI QA reform context, and each has documented limitations. Lewin's model provides the most culturally sensitive framing but offers limited operational guidance for complex multi-stakeholder reform. Kotter's model provides the most actionable

2 Note: Barriers and interventions are derived from empirical studies reviewed in this paper.

sequential structure but was designed for corporate hierarchies and requires significant adaptation for collegial governance environments. ADKAR is the most precise diagnostic tool for individual-level resistance but does not in itself guide organizational-level reform process design.

The most effective change management approaches in the reviewed studies combined elements from multiple frameworks: using Lewin's cultural analysis in the reform preparation phase, Kotter's coalition and communication strategies in the implementation phase, and ADKAR's individual-level diagnostics continuously throughout the process. A 2025 paper from the International Association for Educational Assessment (IAFOR) on school reform, applying all three frameworks in an integrated model, reported that this integrative approach successfully produced sustainable QA improvements across multiple pilot institutions, with evidence that distributed leadership, diagnostic planning, and systematic evaluation were the common success factors across contexts.

The evidence reviewed in this paper positions QA reform in HEIs as a category of organizational change that is harder to execute than comparable reforms in private sector organizations, for identifiable structural and cultural reasons. The "loosely coupled" character of universities means that central administrative decisions do not automatically propagate into departmental or classroom-level practice. Faculty professional identity grounded in disciplinary expertise and relative autonomy creates a cultural resistance to what many academics perceive as managerialist quality surveillance. And the multi-stakeholder governance structure of universities means that change coalitions must be broader, slower to build, and more negotiated than in hierarchical organizations.

These characteristics do not make QA reform impossible the evidence clearly shows that successful QA reform is achievable but they do mean that change management approaches designed for corporate environments require substantial adaptation. The primary adaptation required is a shift from authority-driven to influence-driven change strategies: rather than mandating compliance, effective HEI change managers must create the conditions under which faculty and staff choose to engage with QA reform because they see its value.

Faculty resistance to QA reform is the most consistently documented barrier in the literature, appearing in over 70% of implementation studies reviewed. However, the evidence also reveals that resistance is not monolithic: it has identifiable and differentially addressable sources. PMC research (2022) on faculty resistance to instructional change identifies three distinct types of resistance costs that faculty weigh against change: identity costs (the sense that new practices threaten one's professional identity as an expert teacher), competence costs (the temporary movement from competence to conscious incompetence during skill development), and relationship costs (disruptions to established collegial relationships and course dynamics).

This typology has practical implications. Identity cost resistance requires leadership communication that explicitly frames QA reform as professionally enhancing rather than professionally threatening connecting quality improvement to the values faculty already hold about teaching excellence and student success. Competence cost resistance requires structured capability development support workshops, mentoring, peer learning networks, and adequate time allocation so that the transition period of consciously developing new QA competencies is as short and supported as possible. Relationship cost resistance requires participatory reform design in which faculty are agents in designing new QA systems rather than subjects of systems designed elsewhere.

The Saudi Arabian case study by Kohoutek et al. (2026) provides a particularly instructive example of resistance management at scale. Drawing on survey data from 248 faculty, administrators, and QA officers across four regions, the study found that faculty expressed significantly greater skepticism about QA reform than administrators a systematic perception gap that, if unaddressed, reliably produces implementation failure. The study identified three enablers that successfully reduced this gap: leadership visible commitment to the reforms, technological integration that reduced rather than increased faculty administrative burden, and faculty development programs that built QA competency. Institutions that implemented all three enablers showed substantially stronger reform outcomes than those implementing only one or two.

A persistent finding across the reviewed literature is the pivotal and frequently neglected role of middle management department heads, program directors, and academic unit leaders in the success or failure of QA reform. Kotter's model identifies coalition building as a critical early step, but the composition of that coalition matters enormously: senior leadership commitment is necessary but insufficient without engagement from the middle management layer that translates strategic QA mandates into operational academic practice.

Reinholz et al. (2021) and Couch et al. (2024) both identify department heads as natural change agents for QA reform who are simultaneously among the most under-supported actors in the change process. Department heads are often appointed based on research seniority rather than change management capability, given minimal formal training in organizational change, and expected to lead reform while maintaining full research

and teaching commitments. Prosci (2023) research specifically identifies middle managers as the most change-resistant group within organizations a finding that appears transferable to the academic middle management context.

The practical implication is that effective QA reform programs must explicitly invest in middle management development, providing department heads and program directors not only with information about QA reform goals but with change leadership skills how to have difficult conversations about quality standards, how to build departmental consensus around new practices, and how to maintain momentum between formal accreditation cycles.

Synthesizing the evidence reviewed, six evidence-based recommendations emerge for HEI leaders managing QA reform:

- Dedicate significant pre-implementation time to stakeholder analysis, urgency communication, and coalition building before announcing structural QA changes. Reforms launched without this preparation phase consistently underperform.

- Apply the ADKAR framework to identify the specific stage at which individual faculty or departments are stuck whether the barrier is awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, or reinforcement and design targeted interventions accordingly rather than generic communication campaigns.

- Construct reform coalitions that include respected academic opinion leaders, not just administrators. Faculty are more influenced by peer colleagues whom they respect than by top-down mandates.

- Identify reform components that can be implemented and visibly validated quickly, and invest in communicating these successes broadly. Early wins shift the institutional narrative from “burdensome mandate” to “achievable improvement.”

- Provide department heads and program directors with change leadership training and administrative support as a dedicated component of the QA reform program.

- Build reinforcement mechanisms continuous improvement cycles, QA performance indicators in institutional reporting, and leadership accountability for quality culture that sustain reform momentum between accreditation cycles.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper has examined the application of change management theory to QA reform in higher education institutions, drawing on empirical evidence from a structured review of 46+ peer-reviewed studies and case evidence from multiple national contexts. The core finding is that QA reform in HEIs is primarily a human change management challenge, not a technical or procedural one. The design of QA systems, accreditation criteria, and self-study processes receives extensive professional attention; the management of the human organizational change required to implement those systems effectively receives far less.

The three frameworks examined—Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR—each contribute complementary analytical tools. Lewin’s model directs attention to cultural transformation and the sequencing of unfreezing, change, and refreezing. Kotter’s model provides operational structure for leading large-scale organizational change in complex institutions. ADKAR provides diagnostic precision at the individual level, enabling reform leaders to identify and address specific resistance barriers rather than treating resistance as an undifferentiated obstacle.

The quantitative evidence is unambiguous: organizations that apply structured change management are dramatically more likely to achieve their reform objectives. In the HEI context, where QA reform failure carries significant reputational, regulatory, and educational cost, this performance gap is both practically significant and ethically concerning—institutions that reform poorly do not merely waste resources, they fail the students whose educational experience depends on the quality of the systems institutions are attempting to improve.

Significant gaps remain in the evidence base. Longitudinal studies tracking the sustained impact of different change management approaches on QA culture over multi-year periods are limited. Comparative evidence from transitional higher education systems in Central Asia, Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia—where QA reform is most urgently needed and most structurally challenging—is underrepresented in the literature. And the specific mechanisms through which governance structure moderates change management effectiveness remain insufficiently theorized. These gaps define a productive agenda for future research in higher education management.

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