

# RETHINKING ACADEMIC REVIEW PROCESSES: INSTITUTIONAL AGILITY IN THE ERA OF AI-DRIVEN CHANGE

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## Abstract

This paper aims to stimulate discussion about the growing misalignment between traditional academic governance and the rapid pace of AI-driven change in higher education. Drawing on recent literature and case studies, it examines how existing governance structure — from curriculum approval to peer review processes — struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Through synthesis of emerging approaches to academic governance, including agile frameworks and decentralized decision-making, the paper explores potential pathways for institutions to become more responsive while maintaining academic quality. This review contributes to an urgent conversation about adapting institutional governance for an AI-transformed educational landscape.

**Keywords:** *Institutional agility, academic governance, review processes, higher education reform, organizational change.*

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## 1. Introduction

In an era of unprecedented technological acceleration, marked most dramatically by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence and, universities face mounting pressure to become more agile in their governance processes, spanning both internal institutional decisions and broader academic practices like peer review.

This article examines recent academic research on the tension between traditional academic governance and the need for responsiveness, with special attention to the disruptions posed by AI system. It aims to open a discussion of three core questions: (1) What specific limitations do traditional governance structures, from curriculum committees to peer review systems, face in responding to AI-driven change? (2) Which emerging agile governance models hold the most promise for higher education? (3) What implementation challenges must be addressed to ensure both institutional responsiveness and academic rigor?

Through synthesis of key arguments about traditional processes, analysis of proposed models for adaptive governance, and examination of innovative case studies, this paper aims to identify what is known, where gaps exist, and how theory can inform a shift toward more agile academic governance in an era where technological change is not merely rapid but exponential.

## 2. Impact of traditional governance on responsiveness

Conventional academic governance structures—including faculty senates, curriculum committees, and bureaucratic administrative hierarchies—can hinder an institution’s ability to adapt quickly to change. This limitation has become problematic in the context of AI-driven transformation, where the pace of change often outstrips traditional decision cycles.

Many governance processes were designed when stability and consensus were valued over speed, resulting in sluggish responsiveness to external changes. Verma (2024) observes that purely hierarchical decision models struggle with fast-moving shifts in technology, student demographics, and economic conditions, while more agile governance models enable universities to “respond swiftly” to such factors.

Earlier scholars had noted that the changing environment of higher education — increased accountability demands, industry partnerships, and competition — requires shorter decision timeframes than traditional governance typically allows (Kezar, 2004). Tensions often arise when urgent innovations are needed: senior administrators may view the normal shared governance process as “slow-walking” critical initiatives, such as integrating AI tools into teaching and research, even as faculty defend these processes for ensuring due diligence (Prejean, 2019). The literature consistently shows that traditional governance, while ensuring quality and inclusivity, dampens institutional agility, particularly in responding to technological disruptions.

### **3. Challenges in traditional academic processes**

Several core academic processes exemplify the rigidity of traditional governance, a rigidity that has become particularly problematic in the context of rapid technological advancements. The emergence of sophisticated AI tools has further highlighted and exacerbated existing procedural bottlenecks in several key areas.

#### **3.1. Curriculum approval processes**

Curriculum approval processes, already known for their lengthy timelines, now face the additional challenge of keeping pace with AI-driven changes in disciplinary knowledge and professional practice. Revising or launching academic programs typically requires multiple committee reviews, departmental votes, and accreditor consultations, a process that can stretch over months or years, during which the technological landscape may shift dramatically.

A recent case study at a UK university found that approving or re-validating a single degree program took about 18 months from proposal to final sign-off (du Main, 2024), a timeframe during which entirely new AI capabilities might emerge and reshape the field. Many institutions compound this problem with infrequent curriculum committee meetings and sequential layers of approval. While the traditional curriculum approval process aims to ensure thoroughness and quality control, it appears increasingly misaligned with the pace of AI-driven innovation.

#### **3.2. Peer review processes**

The scholarly peer review system faces mounting challenges in the AI era. Traditional peer review timeframes, spanning several months from submission to publication, have become increasingly problematic as AI accelerates the pace of research and discovery. One survey of authors in the biological sciences found an average peer review cycle of around 14 weeks, whereas authors felt the process should take about half that time (Nguyen, 2015a).

The system has been described as “under stress,” with reviewer fatigue and lengthy backlogs now compounded by the need to evaluate AI-assisted research and AI-generated content. Calls to reform this system have recently intensified, with proposals for open or dynamic peer review models that could better accommodate the pace of AI-driven research while maintaining rigorous quality control.

#### **3.3. Institutional decision-making processes**

Institutional decision-making processes face significant temporal challenges in the AI era. Strategic decisions in universities traditionally go through layers of consultation and governance boards, an approach particularly problematic when responding to AI-driven changes that may alter teaching methods, research practices, or administrative processes within weeks or months.

Leadership studies note that many universities operate as “organized anarchies,” with diffuse authority and lengthy deliberation, a dynamic observed in Cohen et al.’s 1972 garbage-can model but now particularly challenged by the pace of AI advancement. Higher education’s shared governance model, involving faculty, administrators, and sometimes students, struggles to accommodate the urgent action needed to address AI-driven transformation. Prejean et al. (2019) observe that academia’s bureaucratic management style stands in “stark contrast” to agile organizations, highlighting how routine decisions can impede rapid response to technological change.

### **4. Toward agile and adaptive governance frameworks**

In the past decade, and with increasing urgency in the AI era, research has proposed agile academic governance frameworks aimed at making universities more responsive and innovative. These models emphasize flexibility, decentralization, continuous feedback, and rapid iteration — characteristics vital in responding to AI-driven change.

Decentralized decision-making has emerged as a key principle. Rather than routing all decisions through a top-heavy hierarchy or large committees, agile governance distributes authority to smaller teams or units. This approach becomes valuable when responding to AI-related changes, as it empowers those closest to the technological implementation to make timely adjustments. Verma (2024) suggests that distributing decision-making authority and embracing flexibility significantly enhances universities' responsiveness to technological change. Leadership focuses more on facilitation than control, encouraging faculty and staff to experiment with AI integration within a clear strategic vision.

Iterative curriculum development represents another vital adaptation. Instead of large-scale curriculum overhauls every few years, an agile framework promotes rolling curriculum updates that can keep pace with AI advancement. The curriculum design sprint model, where faculty and stakeholders convene in short, focused workshops, offers one approach. At De Montfort University (UK), small teams redesigned curricula in an intensive three-day process, allowing the institution to revalidate 76 programs in just 3 months — a task that traditionally would have taken well over a year (du Main, 2024).

Dynamic and open peer review systems have gained relevance in AI-accelerated research. Open Peer Review (OPR) is one model gaining traction, wherein reviews are transparent and feedback can occur publicly and post-publication (Nguyen, 2015b). Platforms like F1000Research publish articles first and then invite ongoing peer review, allowing for immediate dissemination of findings and iterative revision, particularly valuable for AI-related research requiring rapid validation.

Flexible governance structures have become essential in the AI era. Agile models favor flattened structures or matrix teams over siloed departments to promote cross-disciplinary innovation and faster decision cycles, particularly important for implementing AI-driven changes that often cross traditional boundaries. Some universities have created ad hoc task forces that can quickly address emerging issues, such as developing AI policies. Another approach treats governance itself as iterative: policies can be enacted on a pilot basis, evaluated, and adjusted based on feedback, particularly suited to managing rapid technological change.

## **5. Case studies: Benefits and risks of alternative approaches**

Empirical studies and pilot programs have showed both the potential benefits and risks of moving toward more agile governance. These studies can provide guidance towards a successful transition into an AI driven academic environment.

### **5.1. Curriculum approval processes**

The curriculum overhaul at DMU (UK) provides insights particularly relevant to AI-era adaptation. Using design sprint methodology, the university dramatically reduced time-to-implementation for new curricula, accomplishing in one academic term what typically takes multiple years (du Main, 2024). Despite initial concerns, the rapid process-maintained quality through additional faculty training and expert coaching, including specific support for integrating emerging technologies. The case shows that institutions can maintain high standards while accelerating change to keep pace with technological advancement.

Two U.S. business schools reimagined traditional curriculum committees as active stakeholders in an iterative development cycle, allowing rapid incorporation of AI-driven changes into their programs (Bohler, 2024). Benefits included improved student outcomes in pilot courses, as the agile approach enabled quick adjustments to teaching strategies. However, the strain on faculty time, especially given the effort required to stay current with emerging technologies, raised concerns about sustainability and highlighted the need for adequate support systems.

### **5.2. Peer review processes**

Experiments with open peer review systems have gained significance in the AI era. Platforms like F1000Research and eLife allow visible reviewer comments and post-publication review, which is particularly valuable for evaluating rapidly strengthening AI-related as well as AI-assisted research. Early evidence shows obvious benefits in faster research dissemination and enhanced transparency. However, surveys reveal mixed reactions among researchers, with some expressing concern about maintaining rigorous evaluation standards for AI-related work.

### 5.3. Institutional decision-making processes

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unexpected case study in adaptive governance with lessons for managing AI-driven change. A multi-campus study (Dunens, 2022) found that institutions empowering small leadership teams and expediting decision channels coped more effectively with the crisis. Decision speed did not necessarily undermine sound analysis when teams remained focused and collaborative — lessons that now inform approaches to managing AI-driven transformation while maintaining institutional integrity.

## 6. Implementation challenges and considerations

Transitioning to an agile academic governance framework suited to the AI era presents significant challenges in three key areas:

Faculty workload and buy-in take on extra dimensions with AI-driven change. Beyond the demands of continuous development work, faculty face the challenge of staying current with rapidly evolving AI technologies. Time constraints, already a significant barrier to curricular innovation (Price, 2022), become more acute when combined with new technological integration demands. Even with development sessions or stipends, some faculty may resist changes they perceive as undermining academic autonomy. Successful implementation requires dedicated time for technology exploration, recognition for innovative teaching, and a culture that values both technological advancement and traditional academic excellence.

Quality assurance faces particular challenges in an AI-accelerated environment. Traditional governance processes include multiple checkpoints to catch errors and uphold rigor. In an agile framework responding to rapid technological change, those checkpoints might be fewer or faster. The DMU curriculum sprint succeeded by involving QA personnel in sprint teams and combining validation events to ensure comprehensive review within compressed timelines (du Main, 2024). The literature emphasizes continuous evaluation: rather than one-time approvals, programs could be monitored via defined metrics and short feedback cycles, allowing rapid response while maintaining standards.

Policy and structural modifications must account for technological change pace. Agile governance may conflict with existing institutional policies or government regulations, particularly around AI integration. Universities need to update their bylaws and accreditation criteria to accommodate rolling updates while maintaining appropriate oversight. Governance charters themselves may need rewriting to allow rapid response to technological opportunities while preserving academic integrity. Leadership must often drive a cultural shift alongside formal policy changes (Verma, 2024), communicating a vision that embraces both technological innovation and academic excellence.

## 7. Research gaps and future directions

While scholarly exploration of agile academic governance has expanded, several gaps remain relevant to the AI era. First, longitudinal and comparative studies on agile governance outcomes are needed in the context of rapid technological change. Many published case studies report short-term successes in speed or stakeholder satisfaction, but the long-term impact on student learning, research productivity, and institutional effectiveness remains unclear. Critical questions include whether agile curriculum processes lead to better integration of AI technologies and improved graduate competencies, and if accelerated peer review enhances scientific quality or merely speeds publication.

Second, research must examine how to balance agility with traditional academic values in an AI-driven environment. Higher education cherishes values like academic freedom, shared governance, and scholarship quality — their intersection with rapid technological adaptation demands theoretical work integrating governance theory with both agile methodology and technological change management. Such research could draw on organizational science frameworks to articulate models that preserve core academic values while enhancing responsiveness to AI-driven change.

Finally, change management strategies for implementing agile governance in an AI-accelerated environment require further study. The challenges show that adopting agility represents a transformation of institutional culture in response to technological change. Key questions include: What training helps faculty and administrators thrive in an AI-augmented, agile governance environment? How can academic leaders cultivate an institutional mindset that views technological change as opportunity rather than threat? These questions become increasingly urgent as AI continues to transform higher education.

## 8. Conclusion

Colleges and universities are facing many challenges: new technology (like AI), changing public expectations, and limited funds. This makes flexible leadership more important than ever. Traditional governance structures, while ensuring stability and quality, often limit responsiveness in an era where AI technologies can transform disciplines overnight.

Scholars and practitioners have charted alternative pathways: from curriculum approval sprints and iterative program design to novel peer review models and decentralized decision-making structures. Evidence suggests that agile academic governance can bring substantial benefits, including faster implementation of AI-driven innovations and more dynamic scholarly communication, while requiring careful attention to faculty workload, quality assurance, and policy updates.

A theoretical foundation for agile governance has emerged, drawing from educational research and lessons from other sectors, highlighting the importance of feedback loops, stakeholder empowerment, and technological adaptation. Early adopters show that academic rigor can be maintained even as decision cycles accelerate, provided that transparency and collaboration are built into the process (du Main, 2024; Verma, 2024).

The literature points toward a future where academic governance is more adaptive and evidence-informed — characteristics essential for thriving in an AI-transformed educational landscape. Universities that evolve their governance frameworks are better positioned to meet coming challenges, from integrating artificial intelligence to responding to global crises, while upholding their mission of advancing knowledge. The agile academic governance framework stands as a promising paradigm for the AI era, but one that must balance innovation with inclusion and speed with deliberation.

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