

Research Governance and Capacity Building in Peruvian Public Universities: Navigating Autonomy, Quality, and Regional Disparities

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Abstract

Following the 2014 university reform and subsequent legislative shifts introduced in 2022 through Law 31520, Peru's higher education system is navigating a critical tension between state-led quality assurance and institutional autonomy. While scientific production tripled between 2015 and 2020, over 80% of public university output remains outside high-impact quartiles, highlighting a divergence between volume and excellence. Furthermore, acute structural asymmetries persist, with 60% of researchers and 40% of doctoral programs concentrated in Lima. This paper analyzes how current governance structures shape research capacity and argues for a transition from bureaucratic compliance to a differentiated governance framework. Grounded in the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE), the study proposes a shift toward maturity-based performance funding to optimize public budget execution for research development in Peru's peripheral public universities. This risk of institutional "autarchy" or a severe rollback of quality metrics stems from a specific governance mechanism introduced by Law 31520: the structural restructuring of SUNEDU's board of directors to directly reincorporate active university rectors and institutional representatives into the regulatory body. By dissolving the independent, competitive selection process of regulators, this composition creates an inherent conflict of interest, transforming an external supervisory body back into a self-regulating guild. This structural shift allows underperforming institutions to block external accountability measures, threatening the enforcement of Basic Quality Conditions (CBC). Finally, the paper advocates for institutional alliances where established research hubs act as anchors to serve as administrative proxy handlers for joint research funds, protecting peripheral partners from procurement backlogs without breaking national financial codes.

Keywords: University Governance, Public Universities, Research Capacity, Innovation Systems, Peru.

Introduction

The governance of Latin American higher education has transitioned from traditional collegial models toward an "evaluative state" influenced by New Public Management (NPM) principles (Alarcón et al., 2025; Mejía et al., 2024). In this context, Peru presents a paradigmatic case of regulatory oscillation. Following a period of market deregulation

in the 1990s that led to a proliferation of institutions of varying quality, the state reclaimed its supervisory role through the 2014 University Law, establishing SUNEDU to enforce mandatory licensing. However, the 2022 enactment of Law 31520 has reintroduced uncertainty by shifting the balance of power back toward institutional autonomy, potentially weakening centralized quality oversight (SUNEDU, 2024). The tension between central oversight and institutional freedom is a defining characteristic across the region, where the choice of governance model directly dictates institutional capacity. Recent comparative research across Latin American universities emphasizes that institutional effectiveness relies heavily on well-defined internal leadership structures and cohesive governance rules, which prevent the fragmentation often caused by political or regulatory instability (Bermúdez et al., 2026).

Currently, Peruvian universities are navigating these regulatory changes while simultaneously striving to improve their research performance. Although scientific production has increased in recent years, the system continues to face structural weaknesses, including forms of institutional “autarchy” in governance models that resist external accountability. Moreover, governance practices remain constrained by persistent bureaucratic tendencies that prioritize administrative compliance over academic innovation and research dynamism (Cárdenas, 2025).

This operational vulnerability is severely compounded by the systemic adjustments introduced under Law 31520, which structurally reconfigured the composition of SUNEDU’s steering board by re-incorporating representatives chosen directly by active university rectors (SUNEDU, 2025b). In terms of public administration governance, this transition directly alters the regulatory power dynamic by dissolving the independent, competitive public selection process that previously insulated the supervisory entity from the institutions it oversees (SUNEDU, 2025b). By transforming an external oversight body into an internal, multi-representative forum, this layout introduces systemic conflicts of interest that weaken the objective enforcement of Basic Quality Conditions (CBC) across the higher education sector (SUNEDU, 2025b). For public institutions, this regulatory rollback diminishes external accountability loops, allowing underperforming administrative practices to persist without the pressure of strict state-led quality audits (SUNEDU, 2025b).

To evolve from knowledge transmitters to innovation producers, Peruvian universities must undergo a qualitative transformation. As framed by the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE), capacity building requires institutions to progress through levels of maturity where governance, talent, and resources are strategically aligned (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). Consequently, the core research question guiding this analysis is: *How can a differentiated, maturity-based governance framework reconcile the tension between centralized quality regulation and institutional autonomy to build research capacity in Peru's regional public universities?* To address this, this paper analyzes the trajectory of research governance, examines structural asymmetries between the center and the periphery, and proposes a hybrid framework integrating maturity levels with targeted, anchor-led inter-institutional collaborations.

Research Governance in Higher Education

Governance in higher education refers to the processes, structures, and institutional capacities that regulate decision-making and management within universities (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021). It refers not only to how universities steer and coordinate their internal processes, but external dynamics with state structures, funding networks, and regional socio-economic landscapes (Fatmawati et al., 2024). In the global context, higher education governance has evolved from traditional collegial models, where authority rests with the academic community, to managerial and entrepreneurial approaches influenced by New Public Management (NPM) principles (Mejía et al., 2024). These modern models emphasize efficiency, accountability, and strategic planning (Martínez, 2025). A key dimension of this domain is the distribution of authority within the higher education system, historically mapped through Clark's Triangle of Coordination, which identifies the State, the Market, and the Academic Oligarchy as the primary forces shaping institutional steering (Alarcón et al., 2025). In Latin America, the current landscape is defined by the friction between the democratic tradition of the Córdoba Reform and contemporary demands for regional competitiveness and market responsiveness (Reyes, 2025). Achieving effective research governance therefore requires a careful balance: universities must retain sufficient flexibility to pursue their academic missions, while also ensuring accountability to society for the use of public resources and the quality and relevance of research outcomes (Mejía et al., 2024). This macro-level environmental baseline sets the institutional conditions under which universities operate. To understand

how public institutions navigate these pressures, the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE) offers a progressive framework to evaluate internal administrative capacities (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). By linking resource allocations to distinct organizational milestones, this structure allows higher education institutions to build long-term operational resilience.

This study operationalizes these macro-forces through a singular analytical tool, using the progressive levels of the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE) to categorize institutional capacity across five developmental stages (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025):

- Level 1 (Emerging): Characterized by reactive management and a general absence of formal administrative metrics, forcing university councils and academic leadership to rely on isolated personal initiatives.
- Level 2 (Formalized): Basic structural boundaries, rules, and administrative procedures are established to secure foundational operational stability.
- Level 3 (Collaborative): Marked by an operational balance between formalization and flexibility, fostering internal inter-departmental cooperation.
- Level 4 (Cohesive): Processes are synergistically integrated, data streams feed directly into senior management, and operations are fully aligned with long-term strategic objectives.
- Level 5 (Adaptive): The highest evolutionary stage, where the institution possesses the organizational agility to capture real-time operational shifts, empowering leadership to dynamically reallocate inputs, innovate continuously, and lead within the higher education sector.

In Peru, research governance functions within a "multi-governance" framework where the State plays several overlapping roles: systemic designer, principal, regulator, evaluator, and financier (Martínez, 2024). Historically, SUNEDU exercised a rigorous evaluative role by ensuring compliance with Basic Quality Conditions (CBC), such as defined research lines and qualified faculty. However, the implementation of Law 31520 has altered this power dynamic by incorporating university representatives directly into SUNEDU's governance, shifting the balance toward institutional autonomy (SUNEDU, 2025b). Complementing this, CONCYTEC regulates scientific production through the RENACYT researcher classification system, using standardized metrics to incentivize

productivity (SUNEDU, 2025a). Despite these mechanisms, a significant gap remains between the formal regulatory framework and the actual managerial capacities of public universities. These institutions frequently lack the internal operational flexibility required to execute research budgets effectively or translate top-down policies into sustained academic performance (Mejía et al., 2024).

Capacity Building and Institutional Development

Capacity building in higher education is a multidimensional process designed to evolve institutional maturity and strategic readiness for knowledge generation and transfer (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). It involves strengthening human capital, upgrading infrastructure, and establishing governance frameworks that align university capabilities with societal needs (World Bank, 2022).

To utilize this as a distinct analytical division throughout the subsequent analysis, a sharp conceptual boundary must be drawn:

- **Governance Capability:** This dimension refers strictly to the structural rules, internal authority frameworks, and legislative boundaries that distribute decision-making within the university (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021).
- **Institutional Development:** This dimension represents the actual operational execution, the administrative resource velocity, and the physical accumulation of human and financial assets required to sustain a research culture over time (World Bank, 2022).

Under this refined taxonomy, a university cannot expand its institutional development if its surrounding governance capability fails to coordinate its internal workflows and administrative operations.

This qualitative evolution is conceptualized through the five progressive levels of the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE) (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). The progression implies that capacity building is not merely about resource accumulation, but involves a qualitative transformation in organizational culture and governance capabilities. By evolving their governance, institutions can move past short-term survival and begin to

build a culture of long-term resilience. Institutional development in higher education requires robust systems that integrate human capital, infrastructure, and financial resources. Capacity building goes beyond individual training initiatives and entails cultivating a shared "culture of research" that permeates the entire organization (Araya-Castillo and Gorrochategui, 2025).

Achieving this shift requires moving away from reactive, compliance-driven management toward structured administrative monitoring, where data and internal performance indicators are used to guide decision-making and optimize the allocation of resources (Flori et al., 2025). Successful institutional development emerges when strategic management is aligned with the competencies and motivations of academic staff, and when researchers are supported by efficient and responsive administrative structures (Mejía et al., 2024). In this context, capacity building also involves the professionalization of university management, replacing purely bureaucratic models with those that value specialized knowledge in research administration (Fatmawati et al., 2024).

Current constraints in Peruvian Higher Education

Capacity building in Peruvian public universities has advanced in recent years, yet it continues to face significant structural constraints. A primary indicator of capacity is the qualification of the teaching staff. In 2022, the number of university teachers in Peru was 77,429, but only a small fraction—around 11% in public universities—were registered as researchers in RENACYT (SUNEDU, 2025a). Although progress has been made in postgraduate training, with 62.8% of faculty holding a master's degree, the proportion of doctoral-level staff remains low at just 21.3% across the system. This gap substantially limits universities' ability to generate high-impact research and consolidate sustainable research agendas (Castañeda, 2024).

Financial capacity is another critical component, highlighting the friction between governance capability and institutional development. Public universities in Peru continue to depend predominantly on "Ordinary Resources" from the public treasury, which accounted for 68.5% of their total expenditure in 2022. Although the budget for public universities increased to over 5 billion soles in 2022 (approx. 1.27 billion €), execution remains a challenge, with an average budget execution rate of 85.8% (SUNEDU, 2025a).

This gap between allocation and execution constrains the timely acquisition of laboratory equipment and delays the financing of research projects.

These institutional disparities are further aggravated by localized administrative bottlenecks within public universities outside the capital. Empirical evidence from decentralized Peruvian public universities highlights that weak synergy between strategic planning and public procurement governance severely limits institutional agility and budget execution rates (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). Without a robust framework that integrates public procurement into the broader university governance strategy, regional institutions remain trapped in administrative compliance, failing to translate financial capital into high-impact research infrastructure.

This reality exposes the administrative bottlenecks of peripheral institutions under a highly regulated state. Peripheral institutions suffer from low budget execution rates because their internal administrative workflows are completely uncoupled from external operational realities (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). If an institution is fundamentally constrained by rigid national public procurement laws, deploying an internal real-time financial tracking dashboard cannot single-handedly modify the text of the external financial code (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). However, this internal refinement resolves a different problem: it eliminates self-inflicted administrative processing times (Flori et al., 2025).

While a robust internal office of quality management cannot change national procurement laws, it provides academic leadership with the diagnostic visibility needed to prepare flawless public bidding files well in advance, navigating external constraints with maximum velocity (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). Crucially, these formalized administrative compliance protocols create a transparent, standardized paper trail that protects university procurement officials from individual legal and financial liability, insulating local administrators from arbitrary personal sanctions under national oversight codes (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; Martinez, 2025). Internal administrative refinement is thus operationalized not to override the law, but to insulate its human operators and master its parameters (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026).

Importantly, this internal administrative agility directly dictates how a peripheral university can transition up the external MMU-PE levels when its surrounding ecosystem completely lacks basic qualified human capital (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). When an institution lacks registered RENACYT researchers, it cannot naturally evolve into an advanced maturity tier through raw research outputs (SUNEDU, 2025a). Instead, by professionalizing its internal governance capabilities—using automated tracking tools to secure efficient budget execution rates—it stabilizes its operational baseline (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). This strategic optimization is what creates the financial resource velocity and administrative stability required to recruit external academic talent, build regional laboratories, and progressively construct the human infrastructure necessary to ascend the institutional maturity spectrum (World Bank, 2022; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

Technological capacity has been strengthened through the National Registry of Research Works (RENATI), which connects institutional repositories across the country. This system not only preserves theses and research outputs, but also makes them more visible and accessible to the academic community and society. By the end of 2023, RENATI had collected over 516,000 academic works, significantly improving access to nationally produced knowledge and strengthening the digital research infrastructure of the system (SUNEDU, 2024). At the same time, national funding instruments play a crucial role in supporting research and innovation capacity. Programs such as PROCENCIA, operating under the policy leadership of CONCYTEC, implement a wide range of competitive funding mechanisms.

These include grants for basic and applied research, scholarships for advanced human capital formation—particularly doctoral training—and matching funds designed to strengthen industry–academia collaboration and promote academic entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2022). Together, these initiatives illustrate both the progress made in technological and research infrastructure and the continuing need to address structural inequalities and coordination challenges within the system.

The interaction between governance and capacity building in Peru is complex. On one hand, SUNEDU has concentrated on strengthening baseline institutional conditions

through the mandatory licensing process, ensuring that universities meet the Basic Quality Conditions (CBC). On the other, CONCYTEC—through instruments such as the RENACYT registry and PROCIENCIA funding—has sought to stimulate scientific production and invest in human capital development (World Bank, 2022). While these efforts have generated measurable progress, their overall impact remains limited, as the proportion of registered researchers continues to be low relative to the size of the academic workforce.

These challenges are closely linked to broader financial pressures and high staff turnover. Indeed, public university budgets declined by nearly 7% between 2018 and 2022, and were estimated at just 0.16% of GDP according to Castañeda (2024). Also, post-COVID fiscal constraints continue to limit public investment in science, technology, and innovation (World Bank, 2022; SUNEDU, 2025a). As a result, structural weaknesses persist despite formal expansion. While Peru now counts more than 400 doctoral programs, fewer than 10% are accredited, and only 18.2% of faculty members hold a PhD.

For public universities, capacity building has progressed unevenly with research capabilities and human capital heavily concentrated in the capital, while other institutions are still at an early stage of development. Although numerous universities have invested in graduate programs, research institutes, and internal funding schemes, sustaining these initiatives has proven difficult (World Bank, 2022). Without systematic feedback and learning mechanisms, policy interventions risk remaining fragmented and reactive. This highlights the need for the development of a dedicated national STI evaluation system that can support evidence-based policymaking, guide resource allocation, and help close persistent regional and institutional gaps in research performance (World Bank, 2022). To move toward an "Adaptive" stage, Peruvian universities must professionalize research management and empower specialized units, such as research vice-rectorates, with clear authority over budgets and strategic alignment.

Comparative Analysis with International Frameworks for Research Governance

International frameworks offer essential benchmarks for modernizing research

governance in Peru, illustrating diverse methods for balancing state oversight with institutional freedom (Alarcón et al., 2025; Gaebel and Zhang, 2024).

Methodologically, the international case studies evaluated in this section were selected via purposive sampling to represent distinct quadrants of regulatory centralization and funding flexibility, providing a qualitative framework to evaluate Peru's reform path (Alarcón et al., 2025; Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). Chile and Ecuador were selected to isolate the operational impact of macroscopic adjustments in state-level authority rules, providing direct regional precedents for regulatory expansion and contraction (Alarcón et al., 2025). Germany and the Netherlands were chosen to evaluate advanced, data-driven oversight mechanisms that decouple centralized quality thresholds from rigid financial procurement protocols (Brasil & Trevisol, 2025; Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). By analyzing these specific contexts, the study evaluates two core parameters: the flexibility of institutional resource allocation and the structural design of accountability metrics (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024). This comparative layout serves as a qualitative diagnostic tool to map how varied governance capabilities shape the velocity of local institutional development when applied to peripheral academic systems (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Latin-American Models: Autonomy vs. Regulation

The region demonstrates a spectrum of governance strategies that move away from pure deregulation toward more structured interventions (Reyes, 2025). In Chile, recent reforms have marked a shift from a deregulated, market-driven model toward what has been described as a “managed market” (Alarcón et al., 2025). With the enactment of the 2018 Higher Education Law, the Chilean state reasserted itself as a central regulator and financier, strengthening its evaluative role to ensure quality and introducing tuition-free policies (*gratuidad*) for students from lower-income backgrounds (Alarcón et al., 2025). These measures increased state involvement in institutional management, with the explicit aim of safeguarding public value and strengthening institutional capacity (Alarcón et al., 2025). From an analytical standpoint, Chile's trajectory represents an aggressive reinforcement of state-level governance capability designed to artificially stimulate internal institutional development across the university sector (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Ecuador has followed a different trajectory (Alarcón et al., 2025). After a decade of strong state intervention beginning in 2010, reforms to the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES) in 2018 sought to relax regulatory controls and restore greater institutional autonomy (Alarcón et al., 2025). This shift introduced a model of “supervised autonomy,” granting universities more flexibility in academic programming and administrative management, while retaining state oversight mechanisms to ensure quality standards (Alarcón et al., 2025). This shift illustrates a conscious calibration of macro-governance capability, delegating regulatory authority back to the institutional academic leadership to unlock operational processing times in institutional development (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022).

To understand how peripheral institutions can navigate these regulatory frameworks without succumbing to administrative paralysis, it is vital to analyze the structural mechanisms of collaborative capacity building (World Bank, 2022). A highly relevant precedent can be found in the regional networks supported by Brazil’s centralized CAPES-PrInt funding frameworks (UNESCO, 2024). When research-intensive public universities co-sign advanced doctoral programs and share laboratory infrastructure, they build localized scientific capacity (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2022). This shared framework establishes an ecosystem where resource processing times can overcome local structural backlogs (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

Crucially, this architecture demonstrates that capacity building does not depend on voluntary, non-binding academic cooperation mechanisms. Rather, it requires formalized, state-backed institutional alliances where established research hubs share administrative and scientific expertise with developing partners to systematically upgrade local institutional development (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

European Frameworks: Epistemic Governance and Soft Power

Governance within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has shifted toward frameworks that prioritize data-driven benchmarking and standardized research outcomes over direct, rigid regulation (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). Unlike traditional administrative models, these mechanisms use standardized data sharing and peer-reviewed self-evaluations to steer quality without direct state intervention in daily operations (Sorensen

and Eeva, 2024). Key tools, such as Germany's Excellence Initiative, demonstrate how the state can grant operational and financial freedom to high-performing research institutions while maintaining strict quality guardrails for developing ones (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). This macro-level approach focuses heavily on building high-impact research capacity, steering funding through competitive networks to incentivize open science and regional integration (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024).

The Netherlands provides another model for aligning with international quality standards while maintaining significant research funding flexibility (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025; Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). The government employs a "light-touch" reporting model, delegating the responsibility for quality metrics and strategic direction to the universities themselves through peer-reviewed self-evaluations (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025). This decentralized framework allows institutions to prioritize diverse outcomes, such as open science and societal impact, rather than focusing solely on global rankings (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025). However, this independence is balanced by a strong commitment to public responsibility, demonstrating a governance model that is simultaneously autonomous, accountable, and adaptable to external quality thresholds (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024).

When analyzing these international benchmarks strictly through a macro-governance lens focused on research capacity and scientific production, the operational design of the evaluative infrastructure becomes paramount (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). This configuration relies on an intricate network of databases to track systemic performance while simultaneously establishing clear funding metrics that reward long-term capacity building (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). Furthermore, this approach balances autonomy with systemic accountability by embedding performance-based checks into major funding instruments (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). This strategic alignment ensures that institutional output is linked directly to quality thresholds without needing rigid, direct legislative intervention in daily university workflows (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024; Sorensen and Eeva, 2024). This maintains a rigorous comparison of macro-governance structures and institutional funding configurations.

The relationship between state regulation and institutional autonomy dictates how

governance capability and institutional development interact (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). In highly developed systems, governance tends to follow a model of systematic consultations, where higher education institutions are regularly involved in the development of national research strategies, thereby aligning national capacity building with institutional goals (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). Conversely, rising regulatory constraints can lead to a decline in autonomy, which directly reduces the operational processing times of internal research activities (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). These variations reveal that national governance cultures shape the real balance between state control and institutional self-regulation in research development (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024).

Comparative analysis of governance models

To bridge these international findings with the localized operational realities of Peruvian public universities, we must evaluate how each international steering archetype handles the interaction between macro-regulatory pressure and physical capital execution, thereby translating foreign practices into actionable localized equivalents.

The Evaluative State framework, exemplified by Chile, demonstrates that centralized metrics can effectively eliminate underperforming educational offerings and mandate baseline institutional investments (Alarcón et al., 2025). In terms of our baseline taxonomy, Chile's model represents an aggressive consolidation of state-level governance capability designed to artificially stimulate internal institutional development across the higher education sector (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022). In the Peruvian context, this approach directly maps onto the mandatory licensing baseline defined by the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE) (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). Specifically, it establishes the non-negotiable Level 2 "Formalized" baseline across the national landscape (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). Regional universities must utilize state funding streams to stabilize basic procurement processes, upgrade administrative reporting workflows, and cement a transparent human capital registry before attempting high-level research exploration (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

However, the Chilean configuration also highlights a distinct systemic risk: when state regulation becomes overly prescriptive, it creates an institutional culture focused on

bureaucratic auditing rather than intellectual production (Alarcón et al., 2025). For a public university system like Peru's, which is navigating the consequences of Law 31520, the Chilean lesson indicates that rigid, standardized external compliance checks cannot substitute for the cultivation of internal administrative efficiency (SUNEDU, 2025b). If external quality assurance mechanisms simply introduce parallel layers of central reporting, they run the risk of further choking the budget execution rates of peripheral institutions that are already struggling with administrative inertia (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026).

Conversely, the Supervised Autonomy architecture tested in Ecuador illustrates the operational viability of progressive regulatory relaxation, providing a clear path for navigating the legislative boundaries of Peru's Law 31520. This mechanism alters the macro-governance capability by shifting structural authority back to the institutional executive leadership, aiming to unlock operational processing times in institutional development (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022). This multi-tiered alignment provides the exact mechanism for a Level 3 "Collaborative" institutional transition within the Peruvian public sector (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

Rather than granting an identical degree of autonomy to highly consolidated coastal research hubs and newly established intercultural Amazonian institutions simultaneously, the state must grant targeted administrative waivers to regional universities that hit clear compliance milestones (World Bank, 2022; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). These regulatory waivers allow regional administrators to fast-track laboratory equipment purchasing and accelerate capital execution without violating public accounting protocols (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026). Autonomy is thus treated as an earned, functional capability that expands dynamically as an institution climbs the organizational maturity ladder (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

Finally, the paradigms dominant in the EHEA offer an advanced blueprint for data-driven quality management (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025; Gaebel and Zhang, 2024). These frameworks show that external state intervention can be minimized if the state recalibrates its governance capability to emphasize digital repositories and interoperable tracking platforms rather than rigid administrative control, directly accelerating localized

institutional development through metric transparency (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022; Sorensen and Eeva, 2024). For decentralized public universities in peripheral Peruvian regions (such as Madre de Dios or Amazonas), this methodology maps onto advanced maturity levels by standardizing digital interoperability (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

Peripheral institutions connect their local internal quality management units directly to the national RENATI and TUNI.pe data networks, using publication benchmarking and transparent execution metrics to guide internal seed funding and replace top-down, punitive bureaucratic audits with automated tracking (SUNEDU, 2024; SUNEDU, 2025a). Ultimately, as demonstrated by the Netherlands, this light-touch governance style represents the destination for a Level 5 "Adaptive" maturity stage (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025). Instead of submitting to rigid, top-down bureaucratic audits by central supervisors, a mature regional university conducts its own peer-reviewed self-evaluations, adjusting its research lines dynamically to match local agricultural, cultural, or climate demands (Brasil and Trevisol, 2025; Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

To synthesize the various approaches observed in Latin America and Europe, the following layout categorizes governance structures based on their primary steering mechanisms and their implications for the Peruvian context (Table 1). This mapping explicitly links international models to the internal operational capacity and maturity stages of the Peruvian university landscape.

Table 1: International Governance Frameworks and research capacity

Model Type	Primary Driver	Core Mechanism	Geographic Example	Implication for Peru's Public University System
Evaluative State / NPM	Efficiency & Quality	Standardized metrics and licensing (e.g., CBC)	Peru (2014-2022), Chile	High state control with quantitative output growth; establishes a mandatory regulatory floor.
Supervised Autonomy	Institutional Flexibility	Relaxation of controls with retained state oversight	Ecuador (Post-2018)	Earned autonomy; variable regulatory relaxation based on proven administrative compliance thresholds.
Epistemic Governance	Data & Knowledge	Benchmarking and funding models	Germany	Differentiated research funding; granting operational freedom to high-performing research institutions.
Light-Touch Self-Regulation	Public / Responsibility	Peer-reviewed self-evaluations	Netherlands	Full institutional accountability combined with decentralized, strategic self-regulation.

Regional disparities in Peruvian Higher Education

The Peruvian university system is defined by a deep geographic centralization that creates

significant barriers to equitable research development. Although the country is divided into three natural regions—the Coast (Costa), the Highlands (Sierra), and the Amazon (Selva)—educational infrastructure and advanced academic capital are overwhelmingly concentrated in the coastal metropolitan area of Lima and Callao. Although 61% of the nation's universities are located outside the capital, Lima alone concentrates 39% of all university institutions, creating a significant imbalance in educational infrastructure. This centralization is even more acute regarding advanced academic capital; approximately 47% of all university teachers and 60% of the country's researchers are located in Lima.

Oversight arrays note that the capital houses 40% of all doctoral programs in Peru, establishing the coast as the dominant hub for advanced research and training. Outside of Lima, other coastal departments such as Arequipa, La Libertad, and Lambayeque serve as secondary academic centers, though they hold a much smaller share of resources and research capabilities compared to the capital (Torres et al., 2023; World Bank, 2022).

In the Andean highlands (Sierra), the distribution of universities is less dense, though the state maintains a policy where every region possesses at least one public university to ensure coverage. This region includes departments such as Cusco, Puno, and Junín. While some institutions in these areas are among the top public universities regarding student population and budget allocation, the region generally faces challenges regarding the availability of advanced academic credentials. For instance, specific regions in the highlands lack doctoral programs entirely, which necessitates student migration to coastal hubs to pursue the highest levels of academic certification. The universities in the Sierra often operate with varied budget execution rates and administrative capacity, struggling to match the output and resource utilization rates of the major coastal institutions (Torres et al., 2023; World Bank, 2022).

The Amazonian region (Selva) covers the largest geographic area of the country but suffers from a disproportionately low density of universities. Departments such as Madre de Dios, Ucayali, and Amazonas have significantly fewer institutions and teachers compared to the Costa and Sierra; for example, Madre de Dios has registered some of the lowest numbers of university teachers nationwide. To bridge this gap and address the specific cultural and linguistic diversity of the territory, the state has established

specialized Intercultural Universities in departments like Ucayali and Amazonas.

These institutions are designed to serve indigenous populations and have successfully managed to attract a high percentage of local entrants, yet the region remains the area with the highest rates of student migration, as young people frequently leave their home departments in the jungle to seek comprehensive educational opportunities elsewhere (Torres et al., 2023; SUNEDU, 2025a).

Research and Human Capital Asymmetries

A structural barrier to effective governance in the Peruvian university system is the acute asymmetry in the distribution of advanced human capital and financial resources between the metropolitan center and the rest of the country. This division is illuminated by utilizing our baseline taxonomy: governance capability represents the formal structural architecture of authority rules (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021), whereas institutional development traces the physical accumulation and velocity of human and financial assets (World Bank, 2022). The regional crisis in Peru is primarily an asymmetric breakdown of institutional development across peripheral regions, despite legal changes in national governance capabilities.

This centralization is quantitatively evident in the concentration of researchers: approximately 60% of researchers in Peru are located in Lima, while the second-largest concentration, in Arequipa, accounts for only 5.7%. This disparity extends to the formation of advanced human capital; of the 406 doctoral programs in the country, 40% are concentrated in the capital, leaving regions such as Ica and Moquegua with no doctoral programs at all (World Bank, 2022).

This geographic concentration creates a disconnection between research capabilities and the specific economic activities of the regions—such as extractive industries, agriculture, and tourism—which are critical for national development but lack the local scientific support to innovate (World Bank, 2022). Migration patterns aggravate this imbalance, as Lima remains the primary destination for student migration, receiving 48.1% of migrants nationwide, which reinforces the centralization of talent and resources (SUNEDU, 2025a). Furthermore, financial resources display a similar concentration; for instance, the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM) in Lima concentrates 10% of the

total budget destined for all public universities, and together with four other major institutions, accounts for 31% of the total public university budget (Torres et al., 2023).

Governance barriers

Decentralization in Peru presents specific governance challenges characterized by heterogeneous institutional capacities and varying budget execution rates. While some regional universities, such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Alto Amazonas, achieved execution rates exceeding 99% in 2022, others, like the Universidad Nacional Diego Quispe Tito, reached only 22.7%, highlighting a severe gap in administrative and management capabilities across the territory (Torres et al., 2023). This uneven capacity complicates the implementation of national quality policies, as regional institutions often struggle to meet the technical requirements for licensing and accreditation without external support.

When mapping peripheral institutions onto our primary analytical toolkit—the Holistic Maturity Model (MMU-PE)—severe operational friction emerges within their internal operational architectures. Under our refined diagnostic, this is not merely a financial failure, but an acute administrative bottleneck where weak internal quality management units and a lack of real-time financial tracking dashboards trap the university in an "Emerging" maturity tier. As a direct result, the administrative workforce spends its entire operational capacity struggling with basic compliance issues instead of systematically translating its financial assets into long-term research infrastructure (Campas et al., 2026; Flores-Apaza et al., 2026).

Specific governance challenges also arise for Intercultural Universities located in the Andes and Amazon (e.g., UNIA, Uniscisa, UNIQ). While these institutions successfully attract local populations—with over 80% of applicants being citizens born in the same department—they operate in territories with distinct cultural and linguistic needs that standard central governance models must address to ensure relevance (SUNEDU, 2025a). Additionally, the institutional landscape is often fragmented; the World Bank notes that the lack of coordination and the "atomization" of research efforts in the regions limit the ability of the SINACTI to function effectively, as regional universities often lack the "critical mass" of researchers necessary to generate positive externalities for local

economies (World Bank, 2022).

The deep regional disparities in Peru necessitate a differentiated policy approach rather than a homogeneous governance model. As noted in broader Latin American analyses, the expansion of higher education requires the construction of typologies that allow for focalized public policy which respects institutional diversity (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021). To address the lack of critical mass in the regions, the World Bank proposes a model of "Institutional Alliances," where experienced public research universities (often based in Lima) act as anchors to lead groups of less experienced regional institutions, transferring capabilities and creating economies of scale for doctoral training and research (World Bank, 2022).

To ground the proposed framework in robust regional precedents, it is important to observe how similar inter-institutional models have navigated localized administrative friction. When highly integrated public university networks share advanced doctoral training lines and open their physical laboratory environments to peripheral partners, they build localized scientific capacity across deep geographic boundaries (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2022). These interconnected setups prove how institutional development variables can be structurally built across deep geographic splits (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

Governance frameworks must also integrate mechanisms to close the investment and quality gaps. The licensing of universities in regions previously lacking authorized supply, such as the Universidad Nacional Pedro Ruiz Gallo in Lambayeque and the Universidad Nacional Ciro Alegría in La Libertad, demonstrates progress in restoring regional capacity (SUNEDU, 2024). However, ensuring the sustainability of these institutions requires governance that balances autonomy with accountability. Policies must move beyond checking basic conditions to fostering "centers of excellence" in the regions that are directly linked to local productive needs, such as climate resilience and agriculture, thereby magnifying local institutional development and ensuring that the benefits of higher education are not confined to capital research hubs (World Bank, 2022).

Policy recommendations

Comparing Peru's governance trajectory with regional and international models reveals distinct challenges. In Latin America, governance models range from the political-democratic model of the Córdoba Reform to newer managerial approaches inspired by New Public Management (NPM) (Reyes, 2025; Mejía et al., 2024). Peru shares the "hybrid" governance pattern observed in Chile, where NPM principles like efficiency and accountability coexist with traditional autonomy. However, unlike Chile, which has moved toward a "managed market" model characterized by strong state regulation and funding for demand, Peru is currently experiencing a severe tension between central regulation and localized political pressures for deregulation or autarchy (Alarcón et al., 2025; Mejía et al., 2024). The "counter-reform" in Peru introduced by Law 31520 risks weakening the state's regulatory capacity and, in doing so, may create a growing gap between university autonomy and effective quality assurance (Martinez, 2025).

By contrast, European experience shows that governance based on data and an integrated "epistemic infrastructure" can drive quality while still respecting institutional autonomy (Sorensen and Eeva, 2024). The European emphasis on the "social dimension" and equity also contrasts with the Peruvian reality, where despite recent regulatory improvements, inequality in access and research capacity remains highly significant (UNESCO, 2024). At the same time, many European universities are consolidating "multi-mission" models that give comparable weight to research, innovation, and service to society, rather than privileging a single core function (Gaebel and Zhang, 2024).

Peruvian universities, by comparison, are still grappling with how to rebalance the teaching–research nexus and move beyond a predominantly instructional profile (Castañeda, 2024). The relatively low number of patents obtained by Peruvian universities—398 between 2018 and 2022—when set against a growing volume of academic publications, underlines the need to reinforce the link between research production and practical innovation outcomes (SUNEDU, 2025a).

The analysis of the Peruvian university system reveals a fundamental tension between the pursuit of "Adaptive" institutional maturity and the constraints of a rigid, centralized regulatory framework. To resolve this, policy must shift from checking basic bureaucratic

conditions to fostering a resilient national innovation ecosystem. The structural disparities that necessitate this shift require a comprehensive diagnostic across multiple organizational dimensions (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparative diagnostic of research capacity in Peru

Dimension	Coastal metropolitan area	Peripheral Regions	Governance Requirement
Human Capital	60% of national researchers; 40% of PhD programs	Limited "critical mass"; some regions have 0 PhD programs	Institutional Alliances: Anchor universities transfer expertise
Research Output	Dominates Scopus-indexed volume	High volume of unpublished theses in RENATI	Maturity-Based Funding: Rewarding outcomes over compliance
Budgetary Agility	UNMSM alone receives 10% of total public budget	Execution as low as 22.7% in some regional institutions	Adaptive Governance: Recursive feedback to manage execution
Institutional Mission	Research-intensive orientation	Regionally-oriented and Intercultural focus	University Typologies: Differentiated quality standards

Strategic Realignment and Funding Diversification

Peru's higher education system needs more coherent governance to reduce the gap between government planning and university execution. One way forward is to adopt a "strategic alignment" approach, explicitly linking national objectives with the strategic plans of universities (Pérez and Rodríguez, 2021). This also implies shifting from a culture of bureaucratic compliance to more integrated accountability systems, where transparency, responsibility, and stakeholder participation are embedded in how decisions are monitored and evaluated, and where SUNEDU is strengthened not only as a licensing

authority but as a data-driven promoter of quality (Mejía et al., 2024).

Improving capacity requires rethinking how resources are allocated and managed. Given the current dependence on ordinary public treasury funds, Peru would benefit from gradually diversifying its funding base and introducing performance-based mechanisms that reward achievements in research, innovation, and other public value outcomes, following examples tested in various European systems. Universities should also enjoy greater flexibility in the use of their own revenues and in generating investment income, reducing the budgetary rigidities that now slow down execution and limit the impact of available resources (SUNEDU, 2025b).

Operationalizing Differentiated Governance and Inter-Institutional Alliances

The fundamental gap in Peruvian higher education is the conflict between the qualitative goal of becoming an agile, adaptive institution and the binding legal constraints of centralized public finance codes (SUNEDU, 2025a). To resolve this, the framework explicitly addresses the financial mechanics by changing the legal relationship between the university, the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), and SUNEDU based on institutional placement across the MMU-PE tiers (Tocto-Cano et al., 2025).

- **Level 1 (Emerging) & Level 2 (Formalized) Tiers:** Institutions placed on these initial levels are structurally bound to strict, top-down state supervision. Because their localized institutional development is severely constrained by prolonged administrative processing times, their governance capability is legally treated as compliance-driven (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022). They must submit all public bidding files to centralized pre-audits, as their internal quality management units lack the data transparency to manage public funds independently. Their funding is strictly tied to baseline input maintenance rather than competitive research allocations.
- **Level 4 (Cohesive) & Level 5 (Adaptive) Tiers:** Once a university climbs to advanced levels, its legal relationship with state entities shifts from control to regulated autonomy. The MEF expands the institution's governance capability by unlocking specialized administrative waivers, granting performance-based budgetary flexibility and removing rigid treasury controls (Acosta-Silva et al.,

2021). This allows the university council and academic leadership to reallocate institutional budgets internally, directly accelerating the velocity of institutional development by shortening administrative processing times (World Bank, 2022).

Crucially, this architecture explicitly bridges the "strategic courage" gap generated when internal university leaders are paralyzed by a fear of personal civil or criminal liability under strict national comptroller (Control Interno/OSCE/Contraloría) investigations (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; Martinez, 2025). Technical visibility from an internal dashboard cannot create strategic courage on its own if an administrative official refuses to sign off on a procurement file out of fear of personal liability. To unfreeze this roadblock, the framework integrates external advisory boards directly into the research vice-rectorates (UNESCO, 2024). These boards include external regional stakeholders who co-sign and validate the strategic relevance of regional procurement priorities (UNESCO, 2024). By creating an external institutional shield of local public endorsement, university rectors gain the protective administrative covering required to execute capital budgets aggressively, decoupling daily management from administrative fear (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2024).

Strengthening Peru's research ecosystem requires going beyond isolated initiatives and consolidating structures that can support sustained knowledge production. To improve research capacity, universities need to institutionalize research management by professionalizing the offices in charge of intellectual property and research repositories such as RENATI, ensuring they have specialized staff and clear procedures (SUNEDU, 2024). Also, building a larger critical mass of researchers demands greater public investment in doctoral programs and the creation of attractive incentives for academics to obtain PhDs and develop long-term research careers (SUNEDU, 2025a).

A more tailored regulatory approach would recognize the diversity of Peru's university landscape. A critical component of this shift is the formal recognition of the deep-seated regional disparities in research capacity. Moving away from a rigid "one-size-fits-all" model toward "university typologies" or classifications allows for differentiated quality assurance and regulation that matches each institution's mission—whether research-intensive, teaching-focused, or regionally oriented (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021). This

focalized framework lets universities specialize effectively, granting flexibility in degree formats and assessment methods to better suit their programs and student profiles, rather than forcing homogenized bureaucratic standards (Reyes, 2025; Castañeda, 2024; Flori et al., 2024).

To overcome these structural limitations, Peruvian higher education can draw valuable insights from cross-border institutional transformations. In the European Higher Education Area, the reconfiguration of university governance increasingly relies on collaborative alliances and digital frameworks designed to manage complex, multi-mission expectations. Navigating these complex environments requires higher education institutions to rethink their organizational portfolios and establish collaborative strategies that foster resilience and regional integration (Pausits et al., 2025). Adopting a similar ecosystem perspective would allow Peruvian anchor universities to co-create capacity-building networks with emerging regional partners.

To address these persistent disparities, this paper proposes shifting from a homogeneous regulatory model to a Holistic Maturity Model adapted to the Peruvian context. As conceptualized by Tocto-Cano et al. (2025), this differentiated framework organizes universities into five progressive maturity levels - ranging from "Emerging" to "Adaptive" - so that policies can be calibrated to the specific developmental stage of each institution rather than applying a uniform standard.

Implementing this differentiated design within Peru's rigid state structure requires a clear mechanism to manage public funding execution without sparking a jurisdictional conflict between the university regulator and national financial entities. Under the Institutional Alliance model, a peripheral public university in an "Emerging" phase partners directly with an established, accredited public "anchor" university (World Bank, 2022). Instead of suggesting an unfeasible legal waiver of national procurement codes, the accredited anchor university acts as the administrative proxy handler for the joint research funds. The anchor university executes the procurement files through its own pre-accredited units, protecting the peripheral partner from local procurement backlogs and administrative inertia without breaking national financial codes or exposing local officials to legal liabilities (Flores-Apaza et al., 2026; World Bank, 2022). This approach ensures

that universities in the Andes and Amazon can build the necessary critical mass for innovation before they are evaluated against the same demanding research metrics applied to consolidated institutions in the capital, making the system both fairer and more development-oriented.

Furthermore, the sustainability of this differentiated system depends on shifting beyond static strategic planning toward adaptive governance. Real-time administrative tracking within university governance must integrate continuous reporting loops that act as dynamic assessment mechanisms, so that resources and decisions can be adjusted in real time as conditions change (Scheurwater and Meijer, 2025). By adopting this administrative process—where the institution continuously cycles through phases of assessing operational data, deciding, and acting—universities can transform autonomy from a mere administrative status into a functional capability for resilience (Scheurwater and Meijer, 2025). This integration of maturity levels with adaptive feedback mechanisms offers a route to narrowing regional gaps, ensuring that governance structures are not only aligned with national laws but are also responsive to local developmental needs.

Conclusion

The Peruvian higher education system is navigating a period of renewed tension between state-led quality assurance and the reassertion of institutional autonomy, a dynamic triggered by the 2014 university reform and the subsequent legislative changes enacted in 2022. While national research volume expanded significantly following the implementation of state-led quality assurance, empirical evaluations confirm a strong association between strict state oversight and initial spikes in university research productivity across the nation. However, as the system matures, these mechanisms risk enforcing a superficial compliance culture that prioritizes publication metrics over high-impact research excellence. This tension between volume and quality is clearly visible in recent data.

On one hand, Peruvian universities have made notable progress in research output—tripling publications in Scopus between 2015 and 2020—yet this growth remains constrained by persistent structural weaknesses, particularly in the qualification of academic staff and the system's continued dependence on public funding. The 2022

legislative shifts risk weakening the state's regulatory capacity and undermining quality assurance mechanisms, illustrating the ongoing struggle to balance institutional autonomy with effective oversight. This challenge contrasts sharply with international frameworks like European epistemic governance, which prioritizes data and standardized outcomes to drive quality while fully respecting institutional autonomy.

The central issue highlighted by this analysis is the persistent and largely unaddressed gap in research capacity across regions. Advanced research infrastructure and highly qualified human capital continue to be concentrated in a small number of metropolitan centers, while many regional universities operate with limited resources and weaker management structures. At the same time, the governance framework still functions as if the system were uniform and centralized, offering little tailored support to institutions that face chronic difficulties in executing their budgets or coordinating research activities. As a result, national policies often fail to translate into effective action at the regional level. This disconnect undermines the development of a genuinely national innovation system and reinforces long-standing inequalities between well-established universities and those located outside the main urban hubs.

The Peruvian experience illustrates the broader Latin American struggle to modernize higher education governance. Effective governance is not fixed but evolves through the dynamic balance of administrative mechanisms, institutional autonomy, stakeholder engagement, and accountability. The shift towards a multi-governance approach, where the state acts as a designer and evaluator rather than a micromanager, is essential, and must be complemented by adaptive digital systems and epistemic infrastructures that enable real-time responsiveness.

Addressing the problems identified in this study requires a genuine paradigm shift, moving away from rigid bureaucratic control toward a more flexible and differentiated governance model. Central to this transition is the adoption of the Holistic Maturity Model adapted to the Peruvian context, which recognizes that building institutional capacity is a gradual and often non-linear journey. By categorizing universities across a spectrum—from emerging to adaptive tiers—the state can move away from one-size-fits-all supervision and begin to grant regulated autonomy to universities that have

demonstrated stable and effective governance, while providing more direct support to those still developing. This more refined approach helps avoid the harmful homogenization of research often seen in performance-based systems, where universities might chase safe metrics at the expense of genuine social impact, a tension clearly illustrated by the comparison between the Brazilian and Dutch evaluation frameworks.

Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of research governance depends on replacing static strategic planning with an adaptive governance framework. In an environment marked by political volatility and rapid technological change, universities can no longer afford to be reactive. By integrating continuous feedback loops between the monitoring instruments—which operate in practice as real-time public expenditure dashboards managed within internal offices of quality management—and the decision-making bodies, such as the university council and the research vice-rectorates, institutions can dynamically redirect their financial resources and research lines in real time. This shift redefines autonomy: it is no longer just a defensive shield against government interference, but a proactive capability that allows regional universities to thrive. Rather than merely ticking boxes to satisfy central mandates, these institutions gain the resilience to respond dynamically to the specific needs of their local communities.

Effective policy must prioritize the creation of institutional alliances to bridge the persistent gap in regional capacity. Expecting isolated public universities in the highlands and Amazon regions to accumulate the critical mass needed for impactful research and innovation on their own is unrealistic. A more effective strategy is to incentivize established anchor universities to share their administrative and scientific expertise with developing partners, a strategy aligned with international investment protocols. In this sense, the future of the Peruvian university system rests on a new governance structure that balances the state's responsibility to guarantee quality with the university's need for flexible, autonomous management. Only through this balance can higher education institutions act as catalysts for regional equity, rather than serving as passive contributors to national statistics.

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