Guest editorial: Navigating multiple transitions: corporate governance at the crossroads of sustainability, inclusion, and innovation

Anna Górska and Boleslaw Rok

Górska Anna and Boleslaw Rok are both based at the Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland.

We are living through a time of constant transformation and multiple transitions. These turbulent, liminal states require new modes of sensemaking, decision-making and action across institutional domains. These transitions are not linear nor isolated, rather they are intertwined and often conflictual (Allam *et al.*, 2022). Sustainability is no longer a voluntary addition but has become regulatory and market priority. Technological innovation, especially in AI, creates new opportunities but also introduces ethical and legal complexities (Braun, 2026; Brennan *et al.*, 2019; Debreceny, 2013; Rosário and Dias, 2022). Meanwhile, expectations around inclusion, diversity and social responsibility are reshaping organizational cultures across sectors (Gheradi and Laasch, 2022; Kourula *et al.*, 2017). Business, government, academia and civil society are all being called upon to adapt, and more importantly, to lead the change (Currie *et al.*, 2017; Loorbach *et al.*, 2017).

This special issue of *Corporate Governance* grows out of 2023 ABIS Colloquium, themed *Navigating Multiple Transitions*. It brings together six selected contributions that show different perspectives and contexts of these transitions, drawing on diverse empirical settings, methodologies, disciplinary perspectives and geographical contexts. What connects them is a shared understanding: governance today must operate under conditions of interdependence, contradiction and change. To navigate these multiple transitions, organizations must be willing to question inherited practices and reimagine roles, structures and priorities.

The issue addresses several gaps in academic literature, particularly the need for integrated frameworks that connect governance with sustainability, inclusion and innovation (Aguilera *et al.*, 2021; Ludwig and Sassen, 2022; Zaman *et al.*, 2020).

Despite a wide spread of studies on ESG, CSR and governance over the past decade, the literature remains fragmented and often siloed, with most analyses focused on single dimension: from the environmental performance, board diversity or technological adoption, rather than their dynamic intersections (Aguilera *et al.*, 2021; Arnold, 2018; Zaman *et al.*, 2020). Even comprehensive reviews of corporate governance and CSR reveal a lack of consensus on how these concepts interact and are embedded across different institutional contexts (Allam *et al.*, 2022; Zaman *et al.*, 2020). Calls for integrated frameworks that capture the interplay between governance mechanisms, stakeholder relationships and institutional systems remain largely unmet. At the same time, scholarship on AI, digitalization and innovation tends to approach governance narrowly, either through legal compliance or risk mitigation, thus failing to engage with broader normative and relational questions about accountability, autonomy and legitimacy (Harasimiuk and Braun, 2021). Moreover, most governance research is still dominated by

DOI 10.1108/CG-08-2026-993 VOL. 26 NO. 6 2026, pp. 1333-1337, © Emerald Publishing Limited, ISSN 1472-0701

Anglo-American contexts that inadequately reflect the heterogeneity of global business systems and priorities (Aguilera *et al.*, 2021; Zaman *et al.*, 2020). As recent literature on national business systems and institutional diversity suggests, governance norms, ESG practices and stakeholder expectations are deeply embedded in, as well as shaped by local institutional logics, yet these contextual dynamics remain understudied (Jain and Jamali, 2016; Witt and Redding, 2013). Methodologically, the field remains uneven. While these topics are widely studied through quantitative models, there is insufficient attention to the contextualization through qualitative approach. This collection is thus to fill these gaps by offering multi-level analyses that go beyond these silos. By bringing together empirical and conceptual work across sectors, this issue advances the emerging agenda of governance as an anticipatory and relational practice, the one that is adjusted not only to risk and regulation, but also to transformation, plurality and social inclusiveness.

Across the six collected papers, four themes emerged: (1) rethinking leadership and inclusion; (2) sustainability beyond the buzzword; (3) higher education and the crisis of relevance; and (4) governing the ungovernable? AI and autonomy.

Rethinking leadership and inclusion

Contemporary governance must move beyond static notions of leadership and address the strategic value of inclusion (Gherardi and Laasch, 2022). The issue begins with a focus on the internal dynamics of organizations: how leadership and inclusion shape not just culture, but tangible performance outcomes. In *Cultivating Inclusive Leadership: A Catalyst for Enhanced Organizational Citizenship*, Maria Cristina Zaccone and Pedrini (2026) provide an empirical test of the relationship between inclusive climates and organizational citizenship behavior. Drawing on social identity theory and based on a study surveying over 2,000 employees in Italy's large-scale retail sector, they demonstrate that inclusive leadership significantly amplifies the positive effects of a supportive climate. More than a moral obligation, inclusion here is framed as a strategic governance tool, one that enhances identification, engagement and inclusiveness effort. This aligns with emerging evidence that inclusive governance structures enhance organizational resilience and legitimacy (Zaman *et al.*, 2020).

But inclusion is not just an internal matter. As Kravchenko (2026) argued in *Unlocking ESG Potential: The Interaction of Gender Diversity and Specialized Skills*, diversity at the board level has measurable effects on ESG outcomes. Using a large panel of European listed companies (2010–2022), Kravchenko shows that both gender diversity and directors' expertise contribute to improved ESG performance. More importantly, he finds that the combination of demographic and cognitive diversity returns the strongest results. Kravchenko's findings support the idea that governance is not only about *who is* at the table but *how* differences are leveraged, a view supported by Aguilera *et al.* (2021), who call for more integrated governance frameworks that consider the interplay between actors, institutional pressures and sustainability outcomes.

Sustainability beyond the buzzword

While many firms adopt sustainability rhetoric, the implementation remains uneven (Allam *et al.*, 2022). In *Innovations with Sustainability Potential within the Ultra-Fast Business Model*, Anita Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz (2026) offers a paradoxical study of companies like Shein and Temu. Often framed as illustrations for unsustainable capitalism, these firms are revealed to have introduced production and process innovations, such as consumer-to-manufacturer models and gamified group buying, that may hold adaptive value for resource-constrained organizations. Rather than vilifying the ultra-fast model, the article proposes a more nuanced view: even controversial models may contain elements worth learning from, particularly when repurposed for different ethical and strategic goals.

A similar logic of "pragmatic sustainability" has the work of Svetlana Ikonnikova and Bonini (2026) in *Balancing Environmental and Financial Performance in Hard-to-Abate Industries*. Their paper centers on the dilemma: how to adopt lower-emission, yet costlier technologies in sectors with low margins and legacy constraints. Authors develop an opportunity-cost framework to show when, and under what market conditions, the transition to low-carbon hydrogen becomes viable. The paper does not romanticize decarbonization (Boon, 2019). Instead, it models the trade-offs, providing realistic decision-making tools for managers caught between environmental commitments and financial constraints.

Higher education and the crisis of relevance

One sector where these multiple-tensions are especially visible is higher education. Universities today are expected not only to educate and conduct research, but also to lead by example and operate sustainably across all dimensions of their work (Currie *et al.*, 2017; Loorbach and Wittmayer, 2023). In *Meeting Market and Student Expectations: The Synergy of Sustainability and Educational Transformation*, Nina Kotula and Małagocka (2026) explore how universities are being reshaped by two growing demands: digitization and sustainability. Their systematic review shows that digital transformation, often considered as an inclusive innovation, can also reproduce inequalities and hide the environmental costs. At the same time, sustainability efforts can become fragmented or a symbolic façade, when not embedded in institutional strategy and not internalized.

Governing the ungovernable? AI and autonomy

Finally, Tomasz Braun's (2026) *Liability for Artificial Intelligence Reasoning Technologies – A Cognitive Autonomy that Does Not Help* offers a conceptual intervention into one of the most difficult governance boundaries: who is responsible when AI goes wrong? Braun critiques existing legal frameworks that rely on outdated assumptions of causality and control. As AI systems gain more capabilities and increasing autonomy, the boundaries of liability become increasingly blurred. Braun's proposal is deeply ethical. He calls for a rethinking of responsibility in light of cognitive autonomy, urging policymakers and governance actors to go beyond reactive frameworks and engage in anticipatory regulation.

Conclusion

Across these six contributions, a recurring theme is evident: governance is no longer about maintaining status quo or stability. It is about managing multiple transitions at once: cross sectors, values, technologies and expectations. In this sense, transition is not a singular moment, but a condition, a new reality. It requires organizations to look and work in the in-between spaces, the grays between black and white, being able to work *with* contradictions.

This special issue invites readers to look at these contradictions: inclusive leadership is powerful, but slow. Digital innovation is essential, but ethically ambiguous. ESG frameworks are expanding, but risk becoming superficial without genuine diversity, beyond numbers. AI promises autonomy but challenges our moral foundations.

Rather than offering closure or simple solutions, these six contributions invite for further and deeper retheming of these contradictions. They challenge us to see transition not as something to be managed away, but as a space of tension, where new forms of leadership, learning and legitimacy are (re)shaping.

As guest editors, we hope this collection will encourage a critical dialogue, support discussion and inspire practice in the ongoing work of navigating multiple transitions.

References

Aguilera, R.V., Judge, W.Q., Terjesen, S. and Cohen, L. (2021), "The corporate governance of environmental sustainability: a review and proposal for more integrated research", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 1468-1497.

Allam, Z., Bibri, S.E. and Sharpe, S.A. (2022), "The rising impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war: energy transition, climate justice, global inequality, and supply chain disruption", *Resources*, Vol. 11 No. 11, p. 99, doi: 10.3390/resources11110099.

Arnold, V. (2018), "The changing technological environment and the future of behavioral research in accounting", *Accounting & Finance*, Vol. 58 No. 2, pp. 315-339.

Boon, M. (2019), "A climate of change? The oil industry and decarbonization in historical perspective", *Business History Review*, Vol. 93 No. 1, pp. 101-125, doi: 10.1017/S0007680519000321.

Braun, T. (2026), "Liability for artificial intelligence reasoning technologies – a cognitive autonomy that does not help", *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1390-1410, doi: 10.1108/CG-09-2024-0471.

Brennan, N.M., Subramaniam, N. and van Staden, C.J. (2019), "Corporate governance implications of disruptive technology: an overview", *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 51 No. 6, p. 100860, doi: 10.1016/j.bar.2019.100860.

Currie, G., Davies, J. and Ferlie, E. (2017), "A call for University-Based business schools to "lower their walls:' collaborating with other academic departments in pursuit of social value", *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Vol. 15 No. 4, Essays, Dialogue, & Interviews, doi: 10.5465/amle.2015.0279.

Debreceny, R.S. (2013), "Research on IT governance, risk, and value: challenges and opportunities", *Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 129-135.

Harasimiuk, D. and Braun, T. (2021), *Regulating Artificial Intelligence: Binary Ethics and the Law*, Routledge, doi: 10.4324/9781003134725.

Gherardi, S. and Laasch, O. (2022), "Responsible management-as-practice: mobilizing a posthumanist approach", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 181 No. 2, pp. 269-281.

Ikonnikova, S.A. and Bonini, T. (2026), "Balancing environmental and financial performance in hard-to-abate industries: pathways for low-carbon hydrogen adoption", *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1411-1428, doi: 10.1108/CG-01-2024-0061.

Jain, T. and Jamali, D. (2016), "Looking inside the black box: the effect of corporate governance on corporate social responsibility", *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 253-273, doi: 10.1111/corg.12154.

Kourula, A., Pisani, N. and Kolk, A. (2017), "Corporate sustainability and inclusive development: highlights from international business and management research", *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Vol. 24, pp. 14-18, doi: 10.1016/j.cosust.2017.01.003.

Kotula, N. and Małagocka, K.A. (2026), "Meeting market and student expectations: the synergy of sustainability and educational transformation", *Corporate Governance*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1372-1389, doi: 10.1108/CG-01-2024-0060.

Kravchenko, G. (2026), "Unlocking ESG potential: the interaction of gender diversity and specialized skills", *Corporate Governance*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1429-1440.

Loorbach, D.A. and Wittmayer, J. (2023), "Transforming universities: mobilizing research and education for sustainability transitions at Erasmus university Rotterdam, The Netherlands", *Sustainability Science*, pp. 1-15, doi: 10.1007/s11625-023-01335-y.

Loorbach, D., Frantzeskaki, N. and Avelino, F. (2017), "Sustainability transitions research: transforming science and practice for societal change", *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 599-626, doi: 10.1146/annurev-environ-102014-021340.

Ludwig, P. and Sassen, R. (2022), “Which internal corporate governance mechanisms drive corporate sustainability?”, *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 301, p. 113780, doi: 10.1016/j.jenvman.2021.113780.

Rosário, A.T. and Dias, J.C. (2022), “Sustainability and the digital transition: a literature review”, *Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 7, p. 4072.

Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz, A. (2026), “Innovations with sustainability potential within the ultra-fast business model”, *Corporate Governance*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1358-1371, doi: 10.1108/CG-01-2024-0051.

Zaccone, M.C. and Pedrini, M. (2026), “Cultivating inclusive leadership: a catalyst for enhanced organizational citizenship”, *Corporate Governance*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1338-1357.

Zaman, R., Jain, T. and Samara, G. (2020), “Corporate governance meets corporate social responsibility: mapping the interface”, *Business & Society*, Vol. 61 No. 3, pp. 691-745, doi: 10.1177/0007650320973415.