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CONTENT TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF COMPETITIVENESS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Abstract. The article is devoted to the content transformation of the concept of competitiveness of higher education institutions in the context of digitalization and the search for conceptual foundations for its systematization. In contemporary scientific literature, the competitiveness of universities is defined as a multidimensional and integrative category that combines the ability for sustainable development, long-term performance, and meeting the expectations of key stakeholders. At the same time, a significant number of studies interpret this concept in an overly simplified manner, reducing it either to a resource-based approach or to the university's position in international rankings. Such an interpretation does not consider the complexity of modern challenges and does not allow competitiveness to be used as an effective tool for strategic management. It is substantiated that the digitization of higher education changes the logic of forming competitive advantages of universities and necessitates rethinking existing approaches. The research proposes to distinguish between universal-essential approaches that determine the general characteristics of competitiveness and descriptive-sectoral approaches that specify the content of this concept in the educational and scientific environment. The multi-level nature of competitiveness is highlighted: national (the country's higher education system), regional (the educational space of individual territories), institutional (a specific university), and programmatic (educational programs). It has been proven that considering competitiveness in the context of a digital university requires the integration of strategic vision, resource potential, competence capabilities, and social mission. Particular attention is paid to the role of stakeholders and their interests, which shape the environment of cooperative interaction. Harmonizing the needs of internal and external partners is a basic condition for achieving long-term sustainability and competitive advantages for the university. The key areas in which the competitiveness of a digital university manifests itself have been identified: access to resources, the creation of competitive educational products and services, the ability of graduates to compete in the labor market, the development of innovative solutions, and ensuring the social function of higher education. The results of the research systematize modern approaches to understanding competitiveness and offer a conceptual framework for creating integrated models for its assessment. Such models should take into account the specifics of the digital educational environment, the dynamics of the educational and scientific services markets, the impact of digital technologies on the organization of the educational process, and the prospects for sustainable development. The practical significance of the results obtained lies in the possibility of using the established provisions to develop strategies for the development of universities seeking to strengthen their competitive positions in the global educational space. Further research should focus on testing integrated models in the real-world conditions of digital universities, which will allow for an assessment of their effectiveness and adaptability to a changing environment.

Keywords: *University Competitiveness, Digital University, Digitalization of Education, Strategic Approaches, Digitalization.*

JEL Classification: E24; I20; I25; N3.

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Introduction. The competitiveness of higher education institutions is one of the key indicators of their development and integration into the global educational and scientific space. In the context of digitalization, which has affected all spheres of public life, including education, this category is taking on a new meaning, as it combines economic, managerial, educational and pedagogical, and digital aspects of university functioning. The problem is that modern definitions of competitiveness are often too generalized, do not take into account the digital determinants of development, and do not provide sufficient information for stakeholders to make strategic decisions. At the same time, competitiveness is becoming an important factor in the long-term sustainability of universities, determining their opportunities in the educational environment, the labor market, and innovative ecosystems.

The relevance of the research is due to the fact that digital transformations are changing the very logic of universities' activities: from the traditional model of knowledge transfer, they are moving towards integration into digital platforms, the creation of innovative products, and the use of flexible educational services. This requires a transformation of the very concept of competitiveness, which must consider both classic economic and management parameters and new digital opportunities, including the development of competencies, the attraction of resources, and the formation of strategic alliances.

The aim of the article is to substantiate the theoretical and methodological foundations for content transformation of the concept of university competitiveness in the context of digitalization and to identify its key components that ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of higher education institutions. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are set:

- to analyze the essence and features of the concept of university competitiveness;
- to systematize universal-essential and descriptive-sectoral approaches to its interpretation;
- to identify the risks of inconsistency between the economic logic of universities' activities and approaches to competitiveness;
- to formulate the author's definition of the competitiveness of a digital university, considering modern transformations.

The object of the research is the competitiveness of higher education institutions in the context of digital transformation.

The subject of the research is the content, structural elements, and methodological approaches to determining the competitiveness of universities in the digital educational

environment.

Literature Review. The phenomenon of university competitiveness is the subject of extensive research in global and domestic scientific literature. In particular, attention is paid to both the institutional mechanisms of its formation and the digital determinants in the modern educational environment. Researchers highlight various approaches to assessing this phenomenon, ranging from integrated models to a focus on graduate outcomes and the position of universities in international rankings.

Ukrainian authors substantiate the importance of competitiveness ratings and leagues as mechanisms for motivating development, emphasizing their role in improving the quality of educational and research activities (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, & Talanova, 2024). Other researches focus on the entry of Ukrainian universities into the international market of educational services, where the ability to combine educational and innovative directions to form competitive advantages becomes decisive (Kalashnikova, Chernous, Lakomova, Karpenko, & Zavalniuk, 2023).

The experience of integrating the national education system into the global space is of particular importance, demonstrating how the competitiveness of Ukrainian universities correlates with global trends in the development of education systems (Tsarenko, 2016; Bereka, 2021). In the global context, it is important to take an approach to building world-class universities that combine research functions with international mobility and innovation infrastructure (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Comparative studies of the education systems of the EU and Ukraine are being carried out in this direction, highlighting differences in the structure and mechanisms for increasing competitiveness (Androniceanu & Ohanyan, 2016).

In contemporary empirical models, university competitiveness is explained through a combination of entrepreneurial behavior and dynamic capabilities (Liao et al., 2024; Liao, Chen, & Yang, 2024). Additionally, the role of digitalization and innovation in higher education is being explored, with an emphasis on the creation of new services, the integration of digital technologies, and the transformation of management strategies (Kortemeyer, Dittmann-Domenichini, & Merki, 2025; Kubiv, Bobro, Lopushnyak, Lenher, & Kozhyna, 2020; Bobro, 2024). Researchers also link the competitiveness of universities to their ability to generate social impact, in particular by reducing inequality, ensuring inclusion, and supporting

innovative ecosystems (Kozhyna, 2022; Bobro, Hyshchuk, Strunhar, Bukovskyi, & Alekseeiko, 2024).

Thus, literary analysis shows that university competitiveness is formed as a multi-level and multidimensional phenomenon that combines academic, economic, managerial, and digital components. At the same time, research emphasizes the need for new conceptual approaches that integrate classical definitions, taking into account the challenges of digital transformation.

Research Methodology. The methodological framework of the research is based on an integrated approach that combines theoretical analysis, systematization, and conceptual synthesis of the scientific foundations of university competitiveness in the context of digital transformation. The study applies both universal-essential and descriptive-sectoral approaches to ensure the comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. At the theoretical level, the study uses methods of conceptual and categorical analysis to clarify the essence of key definitions such as "competitiveness", "digital university", "competitive potential" and "stakeholder interaction". This allows the establishment of a coherent terminological and conceptual basis for interpreting competitiveness within the digital educational environment.

At the analytical level, the study employs comparative analysis to examine differences between classical economic interpretations of competitiveness and modern approaches that integrate digital determinants and stakeholder theory. This comparison makes it possible to identify the risks of inconsistency between the economic logic of universities and approaches to defining their competitiveness. The system-structural method is applied to reveal the multi-level nature of university competitiveness (macro, meso, and micro levels) and to determine its internal structure, including resource, competency, and stakeholder components. The functional method is used to identify relationships between strategic objectives, resource potential, and performance indicators of universities in digital environments. To ensure practical relevance, the research also utilizes content analysis of scientific literature and inductive generalization. These methods make it possible to systematize scientific approaches and to form a generalized model of competitiveness of the digital university that integrates economic, managerial, pedagogical, and technological aspects.

Main Results. The concept of competitiveness in modern scientific

research is considered a multidimensional and complex category that requires clarification and systematization. Most authors emphasize its integrative nature, stressing that competitiveness can act as a generalized indicator, the ability for sustainable development and long-term performance of a university (Kalashnikova et al., 2023; Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, & Talanova, 2024). At the same time, despite a significant number of scientific works, this issue is often covered in too general terms: the concept of university competitiveness and its indicators is often presented in a simplified manner or leaves room for misunderstanding, which prevents it from functioning as an effective tool for ensuring competitive advantages and providing sufficient information for decision-making by key stakeholders (Tsarenko, 2016).

Among domestic researchers, who often rely on classical categories of strategic management, there is no consensus on the definition of the concept of "university competitiveness." Many works devoted to the competitiveness of higher education institutions use methodological approaches that are more often applied to traditional markets for goods and services, especially in the first decade of the 21st century. There are studies that provide an overview of the accumulated conceptual tools, but even these do not contain unambiguous conclusions about the meaning of the concept relevant to our work (Tsarenko, 2016; Bereka, 2021; Tymoshenko & Tyrkalo, 2024).

For our research, it is reasonable to divide the existing approaches into universal-essential ones, which describe a general position and are applicable to different situations, and descriptive-sectoral ones, which provide a specific description of a competitive university (or other form of higher education organization) relevant in a particular socio-economic and temporal context, but not applicable to other areas.

The second important distinction between approaches is the level of the system to which the concept of "competitiveness" relates. Researchers identify various options for distinguishing between three levels of competition and competitiveness: global (economy), sectoral (higher education system), and micro (university) (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Androniceanu & Ohanyan, 2016). Within the scope of our research, we distinguish: the national level of the system (the competitiveness of a country's higher education), at which global competition (between economies and national education systems) takes place; the regional level; and the individual level (a specific university).

Considering competitiveness as a multi-level concept creates the prerequisites for identifying its cooperative component. The position that notes the trend of gradual complication and intensification of competition in higher education and identifies a fourth level of competition – at the level of educational programs – also deserves attention (Liao et al., 2024).

Within the scope of our research, we are developing approaches to forming a strategy for increasing competitiveness, primarily for a new format of university – a digital one – which must be both unique and specific, consistent with educational goals, and take into account the behavior of partners. Therefore, we need to define both approaches – universal-essential and descriptive-sectoral.

The advantage of universal approaches is that they leave room for finding non-standard solutions that take into account the context of a digital university operating in hybrid educational environments and on digital platforms. In addition, universal approaches create conditions for collaboration and exchange of ideas, despite different technological and theoretical platforms and visions of socio-economic processes. Another advantage of universal formulations is their conciseness: “the ability of actors to carry out effective competitive actions.” At the same time, such excessive conciseness does not allow for criticism from stakeholders and partners in the field of digital higher education to be taken into account.

An important characteristic of the competitiveness of a digital university is its complex nature. Researchers describe competitiveness as “a set of properties and characteristics of a particular object that determines its ability to best satisfy the needs of an individual, group, or society as a whole” (Kubiv et al., 2020). The goal-oriented nature of this phenomenon and its focus on needs and interests are emphasized. We have grouped approaches to defining competitiveness into three areas depending on the emphasis in the vision of competition:

- “competition as a struggle for resources,” in which case competitiveness means the ability of a digital university to provide access to limited financial, technological, and human resources;

- “competition as a struggle for consumers,” in which case competitiveness is seen as a set of characteristics of a digital educational product (online courses, platforms, services) that best meet the needs of students compared to competitors;

- “competition as a struggle for evaluation and status” in the process of

comparing universities with each other, then competitiveness is seen as a set of characteristics that allow a digital university to occupy higher positions in rankings and prepare graduates who are competitive in the global market.

In contemporary research, competition in the field of digital higher education is most often interpreted as a struggle for limited resources, much less often as the ability to create new digital products, and almost never as an opportunity to change educational processes through digital innovation. This is because the focus is mainly on the short- and medium-term perspective, within which radical process transformations of universities seem unlikely. At the same time, focusing solely on the resource approach complicates the development of the concept of competitive cooperation, which is increasingly seen as an effective mechanism for interaction in digital quasi-markets for educational services (Kortemeyer, Dittmann-Domenichini, & Merki, 2025; Tymoshenko & Yahodzinskyi, 2024). At the same time, even within the resource approach, the need to enlist the support of the entire spectrum of key stakeholders is underestimated. By ignoring their influence, a digital university loses some of its competitive advantages, and fulfilling requirements without real resource support also inevitably reduces its ability to compete. The only way out is to form alliances with interested parties who are ready to provide resource support for the requirements put forward.

To describe the set of properties necessary to ensure competitiveness, the literature often uses an additional concept – “potential” or capabilities. In our opinion, conceptualization through the “resource-competence” relationship is more illustrative, as it allows us to define the balance between available digital resources and the ability to implement them effectively (Bobro et al., 2024).

An important task in this context is for a digital university to select target segments, research topics, and areas of innovation that determine its competitive position. Since, in the main activity of the university, the very formulation of the problem is often considered a significant result, this approach is unjustifiably transferred to the development of the university. In this case, the very discussion of the task creates the impression of work done, while the need for real resources and practical actions to solve it is underestimated. Therefore, we consider it necessary to reinforce the above approaches with a universal key component of competitiveness – the ability of a digital university to select priority areas of activity

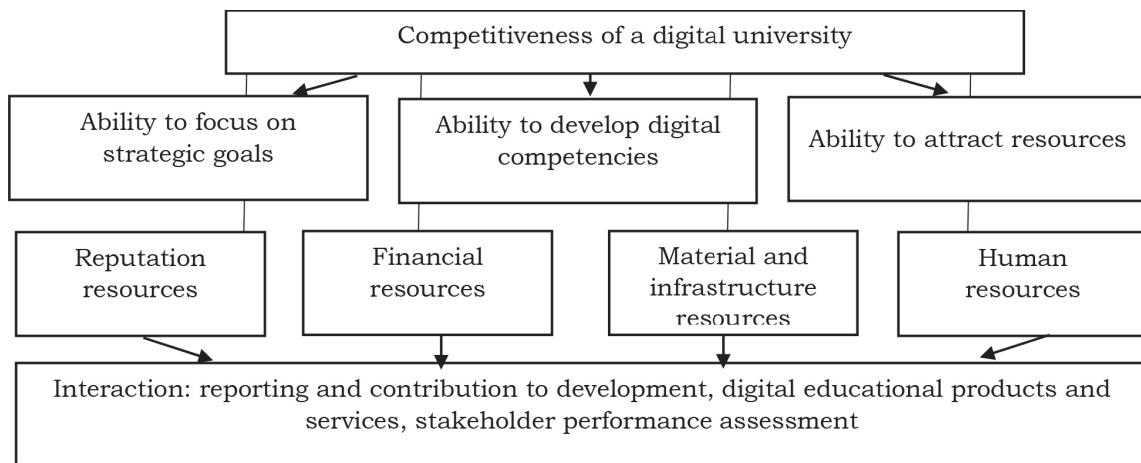


Fig. 1. Competitiveness of a digital university

and target markets, i.e., to focus on strategic goals and competitive advantages. In addition, it is important to systematically define the roles of internal and external stakeholders who are ready to participate directly in activities and provide resource support for joint projects (Fig. 1).

Accordingly, the competitiveness of a digital university (both as a separate institution and as part of a regional or national higher education system) should be defined as the ability to focus on strategic goals and competitive advantages, attract the necessary resources, and develop competencies that ensure the achievement of set objectives in a competitive environment, taking into account the interests of key stakeholders and consumers of educational services (Hashim, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2021).

The advantage of descriptive definitions of competitiveness lies in their high practical significance, as they are understandable to a wide range of stakeholders and allow competitiveness to be correlated with specific areas of university activity. Such definitions vary in terms of their scope – whether they consider only the education market or also include the market for scientific and technical developments, innovative areas, digital services, and other types of university activities. Another important factor is the theoretical concept on which the author relies: economic, sociological, managerial, or educational and pedagogical (Fernández et al., 2023).

It is within the framework of descriptive approaches that a clear link emerges between the competitiveness of a digital university, its educational outcomes, and the positions of its graduates in the labor market. Researchers emphasize that competitiveness manifests itself through the university's ability to:

- train specialists who can compete in the domestic and foreign labor markets;

- develop innovations and digital products that have competitive advantages;
- ensure the effective reproduction and development of all areas of its activities (Antonopoulou, 2023).

Other researches also emphasize that the competitiveness of a university is closely linked to the success of its graduates in the labor market. However, it should be noted that this approach has a delayed effect, as real employment results can only be assessed in the long-term perspective. Therefore, this indicator is used mainly for setting strategic and long-term goals.

Contemporary scientific literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of considering university competitiveness not only as a characteristic of the present, but also as an ability to ensure future development. This applies to educational programs, scientific results, and digital services that can meet both current and future needs of society. This approach allows for two temporal dimensions (present and future) to be taken into account within a single concept of competitiveness, emphasizing that the success of a university is determined by the level of satisfaction of the external needs of society (Aquino et al., 2025).

In addition, the literature traces approaches that focus on the university's existing or potential competencies; on the characteristics of its educational products and services; on the competitiveness of graduates in the global educational and professional space (Bygstad, 2022). At the same time, there are studies that attempt to combine the situation in a specific educational market with the key competencies of the university, in particular the ability to train specialists in narrow specialized niches and, at the same time, form a development strategy in areas directly controlled by the university.

Contemporary attempts to systematize the concept of "university competitiveness" are aimed at creating integrated assessment models. However, the approach that equates competitiveness exclusively with a university's position in international rankings seems too narrow. Such an interpretation reduces competitiveness to the results of the "struggle for status" and pushes the marketing dimension – the creation of the most attractive educational product for students – into the background. Current trends show that linking university competitiveness to only one type of indicator is misleading, as it does not take into account the complexity and dynamics of the digital educational environment.

Our research focuses on the risks of inconsistency between the economic logic of university functioning and approaches to interpreting its competitiveness. Researchers emphasize that from the point of view of the university's economy, especially at the regional level, educational products remain a priority, since it is educational activities that provide the main financial income. At the same time, most indicators of national and international programs are focused on the effectiveness of research activities (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, & Talanova, 2024). This imbalance creates the risk of a gap between the key economic interests of universities and the systemic requirements for their development.

Scientific literature contains attempts to determine the competitiveness of universities using marketing logic, for example, by forming consumer ratings based on the preferences of intermediate and end consumers of educational services (Kalashnikova, Chernous, Lakomova, Karpenko, & Zavalniuk, 2023). However, such approaches, focused only on the end consumer, do not receive sufficient support from other stakeholder groups and, accordingly, remain partial. It is important to emphasize that most definitions of university competitiveness ignore its social mission. As a social institution, a university not only provides educational services and conducts scientific research, but also performs a number of socially significant functions – the formation of human capital, community development, and support for an innovative ecosystem. This means that descriptive definitions of competitiveness must be adapted to a specific historical and socio-economic context.

From the perspective of university operations, competitive potential always precedes competition itself. In order to participate in a competitive struggle, a university must develop an appropriate resource, personnel, and competency base. This is critical both in the case of competition

for funding or grant projects and in terms of positioning in the educational services market. Attracting additional resources – financial, reputational, digital – is a necessary condition for achieving sustainable advantages.

In this context, the competitiveness of a digital university should be defined as the ability to identify target market segments, prepare competitive graduates for them, create innovative educational products and digital services, and implement scientific and technical and social projects. The key is to develop and support competencies, optimize internal processes, and attract talent and resources from various sources (Aquino et al., 2025). This definition is not static and can be detailed or reduced depending on the research objectives or strategic development characteristics of a particular university.

It should be emphasized that descriptive definitions of competitiveness are not universally correct and depend on a variety of factors – institutional, regional, and cultural. The consensus among researchers is that a university's competitiveness is based on its ability to generate solutions to a wide range of challenges and meet the needs of stakeholders (Liao, Chen, & Yang, 2024). The limitation of descriptive approaches is related to their fragmentary nature – the specifics of one university may not coincide with the list of characteristics identified for another (Androniceanu & Ohanyan, 2016). At the same time, descriptive approaches have high practical value, especially in the context of strategic dialogue with stakeholders. This value increases if the definition is adapted to a specific type of university or the digital environment in which it operates.

Thus, although our research is based on universal definitions of competitiveness, we emphasize the importance of combining them with descriptive approaches. Only the integration of these two dimensions allows us to reveal the multidimensionality of the concept of digital university competitiveness and to take into account both strategic and practical aspects of its development. Universal definitions create the basis for forming a general conceptual framework, while descriptive ones refine it in an applied dimension, focusing on specific markets, areas of activity, and stakeholder needs. The combination of these approaches provides an opportunity to form a comprehensive strategy capable of harmonizing the strategic goals of the university with the expectations of key stakeholders and the requirements of a competitive educational environment.

Conclusions. The research revealed that the concept of university competitiveness is multidimensional and requires the integration

of universal-essential and descriptive-sectoral approaches. This allows for both strategic and applied aspects of higher education development in the context of digital transformation to be taken into account. It has been established that the competitiveness of a digital university is determined by its ability to focus on strategic goals, attract resources, form and develop competencies, and coordinate the interests of key stakeholders.

The main scientific approaches to interpreting competitiveness are analyzed: resource-based, education product-based, and status and ranking-based. It has been established that their effectiveness depends on their combination with digital development concepts and on taking into account the context in which universities operate. An important characteristic of competitiveness in the digital environment is the balance between resources and competencies, which ensures the university's adaptability to challenges and creates the conditions for the formation of sustainable competitive advantages.

A summary of the research allowed us to identify several key tasks in the field of ensuring competitiveness: the development

of digital educational products and services, the formation of alliances with stakeholders, support for innovative research, the training of competitive graduates, and effective positioning in the global educational space. Particular attention is paid to the need to harmonize the strategic goals of universities with the expectations of society and the economic interests of the state.

The research results show that the competitiveness of a digital university should be understood as a complex characteristic that encompasses a strategic vision for development, effective use of resource potential, the formation of competency capabilities, and the implementation of a social mission. Its determining factor is the university's ability not only to respond to the challenges of the digital educational environment, but also to actively form new approaches to the organization of educational and scientific processes. Further scientific research should focus on creating integrated assessment models that reflect the specifics of digital transformations, take into account the volatility of educational markets, and determine the trajectories of sustainable development of universities.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ ЗМІСТУ ПОНЯТТЯ КОНКУРЕНТОСПРОМОЖНОСТІ У КОНТЕКСТІ ЦИФРОВІЗАЦІЇ ЗАКЛАДІВ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ

Стаття присвячена трансформації змісту поняття конкурентоспроможності закладів вищої освіти в умовах цифровізації та пошуку концептуальних засад для його систематизації. У сучасній науковій літературі конкурентоспроможність університетів визначається як багатовимірна й інтегративна категорія, що поєднує у собі здатність до стійкого розвитку, довгострокової результативності та відповідності очікуванням ключових стейкхолдерів. Водночас значна кількість досліджень трактує це поняття надмірно спрощено, зводячи його або до ресурсного підходу, або до позиції університету у міжнародних рейтингах. Така інтерпретація не враховує комплексності сучасних викликів і не дає можливості застосовувати конкурентоспроможність як ефективний інструмент стратегічного управління. Обґрунтовано, що цифровізація вищої освіти змінює логіку формування конкурентних переваг університетів та зумовлює необхідність переосмислення існуючих підходів. У дослідженні запропоновано розрізняти універсально-сутнісні підходи, що визначають загальні характеристики конкурентоспроможності, та дескриптивно-галузеві, які конкретизують зміст цього поняття в освітньо-науковому середовищі. Виокремлено багаторівневий характер конкурентоспроможності: національний (система вищої освіти країни), регіональний (освітній простір окремих територій), інституційний (конкретний університет) та програмний (освітні програми). Доведено, що розгляд конкурентоспроможності у контексті цифрового університету потребує інтеграції стратегічного бачення, ресурсного потенціалу, компетентнісних можливостей і соціальної місії. Особлива увага приділена ролі стейкхолдерів та їх інтересів, які формують середовище кооперативної взаємодії. Гармонізація потреб внутрішніх і зовнішніх партнерів стає базовою умовою досягнення довгострокової стійкості та конкурентних переваг університету. Визначено ключові напрями, за якими проявляється конкурентоспроможність цифрового університету: доступ до ресурсів, створення конкурентних освітніх продуктів і сервісів, здатність випускників витримувати конкуренцію на ринку праці, розробка інноваційних рішень та забезпечення соціальної функції вищої освіти. Результати дослідження систематизують сучасні підходи до розуміння конкурентоспроможності та пропонують концептуальну основу для створення інтегральних моделей її оцінювання. Такі моделі мають враховувати специфіку цифрового освітнього середовища, динаміку ринків освітніх і наукових послуг, вплив цифрових технологій на організацію освітнього процесу та перспективи сталого розвитку. Практичне значення отриманих результатів полягає у можливості використання сформованих положень для розробки стратегій розвитку університетів, які прагнуть змінити свої конкурентні позиції у глобальному освітньому просторі. Подальші дослідження доцільно зосередити на апробації інтегральних моделей у реальних умовах функціонування цифрових університетів, що дозволить оцінити їхню ефективність та адаптивність до мінливого середовища.

Ключові слова: конкурентоспроможність університету, цифровий університет, цифровізація освіти, стратегічні підходи, діджиталізація.

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