

## PROGRAM GOVERNANCE: OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM MANAGEMENT STANDARDS

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**Purpose:** This article aims to conduct a thorough analysis of program governance, considered from multiple perspectives. Despite the extensive literature in the field of program management, there is a clear knowledge gap in understanding program governance and the effectiveness of various tools for its assessment, which limits the understanding of their practical usefulness.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article is cross-sectional, based on a literature review and desk research technique.

**Findings:** The cross-sectional approach and literature review employed in this study have enabled a comprehensive understanding of program governance. Furthermore, the analysis of program governance assessment models has revealed a methodological shortfall in developing a complete approach that would provide comprehensive recommendations for improving governance processes.

**Originality/value:** The article discusses both the role and significance of program governance in the program management process, key areas, and models for evaluating program governance.

**Keywords:** Program governance, program management, program context, assessment models.

**Category of the paper:** General review

### 1. Introduction

In the face of increasing complexity and rapid changes in the global business environment, program management takes on crucial significance (Yan et al., 2019) as a tool enabling organizations to achieve strategic goals and maintain competitiveness (Hu et al., 2015). Program management encompasses actions taken to coordinate the organization, direct, and implement a set of projects that collectively lead to the attainment of strategically significant benefits (Trzeciak, 2023b).

For most organizations, a program constitutes a significant undertaking (Stretton, 2020), involving substantial financial investments and significant change. Furthermore, the organization's strategy and policies that underlie the program are both influenced by and influence the internal and external environment (Stellingwerf, Zandhuis, 2013). Moreover, a program often confirms or questions strategic analyses and the resulting conclusions. To achieve this, a program must be enduring yet flexible to meet strategic requirements (Ritson et al., 2012). Hence, there is a need to maintain close alignment with the dynamic organization's strategy, both at the program level (Martinsuo, Hoverfält, 2018) and its component projects (Rijke et al., 2014). Secondly, a program should establish a functioning environment that is both robust and sufficiently adaptable to deal with frequent, sometimes radical changes in its boundaries (Trzeciak, 2023a). Therefore, it is essential to ensure an effective flow of feedback from programs to those responsible for the strategy (Turkulainen et al., 2015). This enables them to refine future strategies based on facts and data gathered from programs.

Such a developed system is defined in the literature as program governance, encompassing a set of principles, processes, and structures aimed at directing and controlling programs. This governance framework plays an invaluable role in ensuring that program initiatives are executed efficiently and in alignment with stakeholder expectations (Khatib et al., 2023; Zhai et al., 2017). Furthermore, in the face of the ever-evolving business environment, program governance becomes a key mechanism enabling organizations to adapt to changes and capitalize on new opportunities (Derakhshan et al., 2020). The essence of program governance lies in creating a structure that facilitates effective management of complex initiatives that go beyond traditional project boundaries. By integrating principles, processes, and structures, program governance ensures that all program elements are coordinated and aligned with the organization's overall strategy (Müller, 2009; Müller et al., 2014; Pellegrinelli, 2011).

The article focuses on exploring various aspects of program governance, including the analysis of its areas and assessment models.

## **2. Methodology**

This article aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of program governance, viewed from multiple perspectives. Initially, it focuses on clearly explaining the definition of program governance, which is crucial for understanding its significance in a broader context. Next, it explores the various components of governance that are essential for effective program management. Special attention is given to governance assessment methods, presenting a variety of tools and techniques that enable the identification of strengths and weaknesses in program management. Consequently, the article demonstrates how the application of these tools can systematically improve management processes and increase the efficiency of programs.

It also emphasizes the importance of continuous assessment and adjustment of management strategies to meet the dynamically changing requirements and challenges in the field of program management.

However, despite the extensive literature in the field of program management, there is a clear knowledge gap in the integration of theory and practice (Martinsuo, Hoverfält, 2018). Most research focuses on the theoretical aspects of management, often overlooking the practical implications and real challenges associated with implementing these concepts in dynamic business environments (Dźwigoł, Trzeciak, 2023; Trzeciak, 2022). Additionally, there is a lack of research on the effectiveness of various tools for assessing program governance (El Khatib et al., 2022; Flankova et al., 2023; Derakhshan et al., 2020), which limits the understanding of their practical utility. This article aims to fill this gap, allowing for a better understanding of how theory can be applied in practice and what the real effects of using different tools in program management are.

In pursuing this goal, the author formulates a series of significant research questions. The first concerns the definition of program governance and its place in the structure of corporate governance (RQ1). The next question focuses on identifying the key areas of program governance necessary for effective management (RQ2). The final question examines the various tools for assessing program governance, which can be used for analysis and improvement of management processes (RQ3). By effectively addressing these multi-faceted issues, the article aims to create a comprehensive picture that enables readers to gain a deeper understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of program governance, its impact on management effectiveness, and the possibilities for its assessment and refinement.

Utilizing a deductive approach, this article is based on a cross-sectional methodology, in line with the model presented by Zangirolami-Raimundo et al. (2018). The foundation of the research is a thorough analysis of literature and desk research, following the methods described by Wahid et al. (2023) and Guerin et al. (2018). These research techniques provide a solid foundation for exploring and analyzing an extensive knowledge base on program governance in project management. This approach not only allows for a deeper understanding of existing concepts and theories but also for the identification of research gaps and new perspectives. Focusing on a variety of sources and a wide range of literature significantly contributes to developing a comprehensive and profound understanding of the discussed topic, which is key to creating new, innovative concepts in the field of program management. Consequently, the article becomes not just a compendium of existing knowledge but also a platform for further research and discussion.

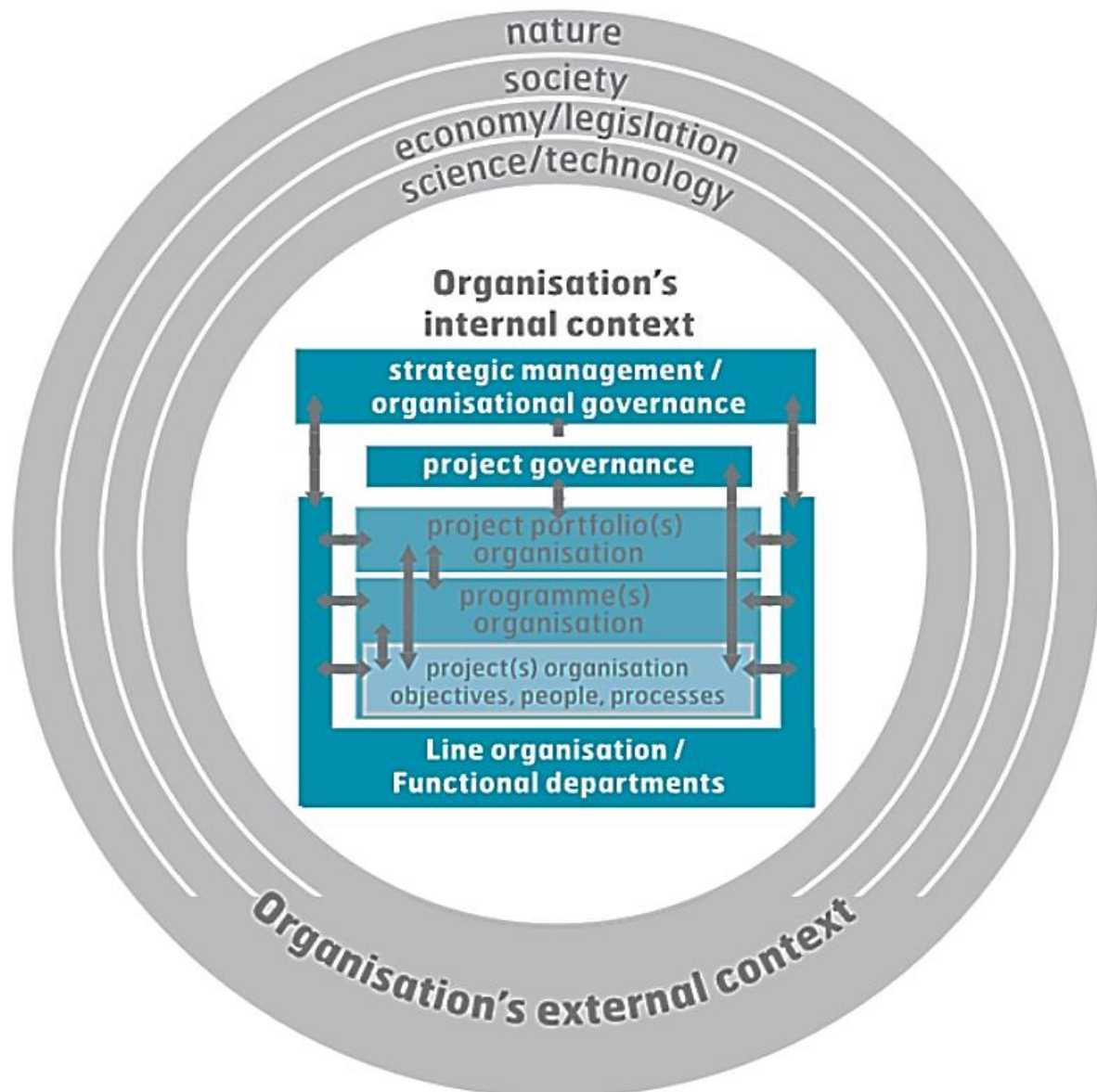
### **3. How is program governance defined, and what role does it play in the context of corporate governance?**

Understanding program governance and its role in the context of corporate governance first requires examining what program management means in practice. A program, in the context of management, is a collection of related projects and activities (Shao, Müller, 2011) that are coordinated to achieve specific benefits (Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021) and strategic goals (Miterev et al., 2020), which exceed the capabilities of a single project or generate benefits greater than those arising from the capabilities of individual projects (Trzeciak, 2023a). Key to the effectiveness and success of such a program is the environment in which it operates, encompassing both internal and external aspects.

The ISO 21500 standard, offering a framework for project management, emphasizes the importance of understanding the project environment both in its internal and external context (Stellingwerf, Zandhuis, 2013). These environmental elements, identified and analyzed by the project team, are essential for effective planning, execution, and monitoring of the project. Similarly, program management standards such as *Managing Successful Programmes* (MSP, 2020) and the *Standard for Program Management* (SPM) published by the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2017), also emphasize the importance of understanding the program context in shaping program governance. Additionally, the IPMA PEB (Project Excellence Baseline) standard, whose fundamental premise is the harmonization of the actions of project and program leaders and teams with the principles and policies defined within the governance, also highlights the importance of the project context (Figure 1). This concept underscores the importance of aligning project strategies and actions with broader organizational goals and principles, which significantly contributes to the success and effectiveness of program management.

In this context, program governance is defined as a systematic approach to managing programs, which includes principles, policies, procedures, and structures responsible for ensuring that programs are managed effectively and in alignment with the organization's goals. Broadly, program governance ensures that decisions regarding the program are made transparently, taking into account the interests of all parties, and that resources are utilized effectively to achieve strategic objectives.

Analyzing the definitions proposed by program management standards such as MSP (*Managing Successful Programmes*) and SPM (*Standard for Program Management*), similar elements can be observed. MSP defines program governance as a collection of functions, duties, processes, and procedures that determine the way a program is initiated, managed, and controlled (MSP, 2020). This definition emphasizes the importance of a well-organized management system, which is key to the effective conduct of programs and the achievement of set goals.



**Figure 1.** External and internal context of the project.

Source: IPMA, 2016, p. 36.

Conversely, PMI in its approach to program governance, as described in the Standard for Program Management, defines it as the process of developing, communicating, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating policies, procedures, organizational structures, and practices associated with a given program (SPM, 2017). This perspective indicates the dynamic nature of program governance, encompassing not only the establishment of structures and principles but also their continuous evaluation and adjustment to changing conditions and requirements.

In both definitions, emphasis is placed on a systemic approach to program management, which includes both structural and procedural aspects. The importance of establishing appropriate management frameworks and their effective communication and implementation in practice is emphasized. Both MSP and SPM highlight the need to consider the interests of various parties and ensure transparency in decision-making, which is crucial for the success of programs and for building trust within the organization and with its stakeholders.

In the context of corporate governance, program governance plays a key role (Khatib et al., 2023), as it is the mechanism through which organizations can ensure that their program initiatives are aligned with their overall strategy and direction of action (Derakhshan et al., 2020). This is particularly important in the current times, as organizations face the challenges of a dynamic business environment and growing stakeholder expectations (Martinsuo, 2023; Trzeciak, 2015). Effective program governance not only ensures the achievement of specific program goals but also strengthens the overall management structure (Khan, 2014), accountability, and transparency within the organization (Miterev et al., 2016), which is crucial for maintaining stakeholder trust and long-term corporate stability.

The dynamic nature of program governance, as evident from the project management literature, is a key element in the effective management and adaptation of programs to changing conditions (Derakhshan et al., 2020). In the perspective of evolutionary governance theory (Beunen et al., 2015), governance structures are not seen as static, but as continuously changing and adapting to new challenges. This perspective emphasizes that program governance must be flexible to effectively respond to the dynamics of internal relationships and the external environment (Qiu et al., 2019). Such flexibility allows for achieving higher capabilities and increasing efficiency within the program (Adami, Verschoore, 2018; Müller et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2008; Zhai et al., 2017). Moreover, Derakhshan et al. (2020) also highlight that the configurations, dependencies, and mechanisms of governance undergo changes during the development of the program. This means that the management approach, decision-making, and stakeholder relationships are subject to variability in response to the nonlinear and complex dynamics of the context (Li et al., 2018). Van Assche et al. (2013) emphasize that as a program evolves, it is necessary to continuously direct and control the governance mechanism, balance goals, and define rights and responsibilities, allowing for effective adaptation to changing conditions.

In summary, program governance is a key element in the effective management of programs, ensuring that activities are conducted efficiently and in alignment with the organization's goals. It is based on a systematic approach that includes principles, policies, procedures, and structures (Müller, 2009), which support transparent decision-making (Müller et al., 2014), consideration of the interests of all parties, and effective resource utilization (Pellegrinelli, 2011). This approach has a direct impact on achieving strategic goals and strengthens the management structure, accountability, and transparency within the organization. Additionally, the theory of evolutionary governance emphasizes that program governance structures must be flexible and adaptive to effectively respond to changing internal and external conditions, which is essential in the face of a dynamic business environment (Derakhshan et al., 2020). In this way, program governance not only supports the realization of individual projects within the program but also contributes to the long-term stability and success of the entire organization.

#### 4. Key areas of program governance

In the context of program management, the effectiveness of program governance is a key factor determining success, both short-term and long-term. The structure of program governance plays a fundamental role in defining and implementing management mechanisms essential for achieving the program's objectives.

In the SPM (Standard for Program Management) standard, program management activities are conducted in all phases of the program life cycle and require organizations to establish and enforce policies that include the following aspects (SPM, 2016, p. 22):

1. Common procedures for all projects within the program.
2. Proper controls to ensure consistent application of procedures.
3. Approach to developing and documenting program assumptions and decisions.
4. Approach to managing changes in the program.
5. Quantifiable measures for assessing the success of individual projects and the program.
6. Common practices for recording risks, issues, benefit measurements, and lessons learned.

Policies developed by the program office, in collaboration with the steering committee and project team, provide a framework for all program activities (SPM, 2017).

On the other hand, the MSP (Managing Successful Programmes) standard defines program governance as a framework of authority and responsibility applied by investing organizations to ensure effective management and value creation. Within these structures, the program requires the implementation of controls that ensure transparency and trust that activities will proceed as expected. These controls include policies, processes, tools, and behaviors. In MSP, program governance encompasses seven key frameworks designed to provide a comprehensive and coherent approach to program management, as reflected in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Governance themes in the MSP standard*

MSP themes	Explanation
Organization	The area of the program organization to ensure effective leadership, financing, supervision, and decision-making, including clarity on roles and their responsibilities and delegating the boundaries of authority.
Design	Area ensuring clarity of the final state and understanding of benefits and risks.
Justification	Area ensuring the justification of capital and resource investment by balancing financial capabilities and achievability with desired stakeholder value benefits.
Structure	Area defining the way projects and other activities are carried out, ensuring the best pace of delivery to enable the organization to transition to the future state and achieve benefits.
Knowledge	Area defining ways of acquiring, managing, and utilizing knowledge and information for drawing conclusions and building a culture and practice of continuous improvement.
Assurance	Area providing transparency and assurance to the sponsoring group that the program will achieve its goals, focusing on the most risky aspects of the program.
Decisions	Area defining how decisions are made at various points in the program lifecycle, whether they relate to problem-solving, risk response, or any other choice requiring a considered and managed approach.

Source: Own study based on: Axelos Global Best Practice. (2020). MSP – Managing Successful Programmes. London: TSO, The Stationery Office.

Aside from the mentioned standards, there are also numerous studies on effective program management. For instance, a study on the role of the Program Management Office (PgMO) identifies five key areas of program governance that are crucial for its success (Trzeciak, 2023b):

- Maintaining program governance,
- Program implementation,
- Program planning and budgeting,
- Processes directly related to engaging program stakeholders and building and maintaining relationships,
- Managing requirements and knowledge resulting from program implementation.

However, Li et al. (2018) suggests that as governance structures evolve, the distinction between upper-tier governance levels and their subordinate departments becomes less clear. Evolutionary governance theory proposes that these governance structures consist of a dynamic interplay among various elements, including actors, institutions, knowledge, and power. These components are constantly changing and influencing each other in an interconnected manner, as explained by Beunen et al. (2015).

Furthermore, the analysis of literature regarding factors supporting effective program management identified 5 areas including strategic alignment, process approach, organization and communication, knowledge, as well as monitoring and control (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Areas of program governance in the light of literature research*

Areas of program governance	Specification of factors supporting program implementation	Authors
Strategic alignment	Strategic program management	(Miterev et al., 2020; Pollack et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2022)
	Concurrency of the program's goals with the organization's strategy	(Duryan, Smyth, 2019; Pellegrinelli et al., 2015; Laine et al., 2016; Al-Zwainy Al-Marsomi, 2023)
	Clear identification and planning of benefits, including their categorization and prioritization	(Miterev et al., 2020; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)
	Program planning	(Rijke et al., 2014; Pellegrinelli et al., 2015; Latip et al., 2023; Al-Zwainy, Al-Marsomi, 2023)
Process approach	Selection of program implementation method	(Pollack et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2022)
	Program Management Office	(Rijke et al., 2014; Latip et al., 2023)
	Management processes and decision making	(Rijke et al., 2014; Pellegrinelli et al., 2015)
	Integration mechanisms	(Vuorinen, Martinsuo, 2018; Pellegrinelli et al., 2015)
	Adaptive delivery of benefits	(Pollack et al., 2013; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)



Cont. table 2.

Organization and communication	Vertical and horizontal communication	(Duryan, Smyth, 2019; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)
	Requirements for stakeholder interest and cooperation in the program	(Duryan, Smyth, 2019; Miterev et al., 2020; Laine et al., 2016; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021; Latip et al., 2023)
	Competencies of the program management team	(Pollack et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2022)
	Autonomy and decision making	(Vuorinen, Martinsuo, 2018; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)
Knowledge	Knowledge management	(Duryan, Smyth, 2019; Miterev et al., 2020; Amelia et al. 2022)
	Development and Maintenance of Competencies	(Miterev et al., 2020; Pellegrinelli et al., 2015)
	Decision Support Systems	(Pellegrinelli et al., 2015; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)
	Culture of Knowledge Sharing	(Duryan, Smyth, 2019; Amelia et al., 2022)
Monitoring and control	Program performance	(Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021; Al-Zwainy, Al-Marsomi, 2023)
	Mechanisms for Tracking and Evaluating Progress	(Shi et al., 2014; Fernandes, O'Sullivan, 2021)
	Reporting and Communication	(Shi et al., 2014; Laine et al., 2016)
	Quality Control and Compliance	(Pellegrinelli et al., 2015; Amelia et al. 2022)

Source: Own work.

In summary, program management requires an effective governance structure, which is a key factor in success both in the short and long term. Program management standards like SPM and MSP offer frameworks covering a wide range of aspects, from organization to design, justification, structure, knowledge, quality assurance, and decision-making processes. Moreover, literature research not only confirms the frameworks included in the standards but also extends them with new areas related to strategic alignment and process approach.

## 5. Selected models enabling the assessment of program governance

There are several models that support organizations in assessing and monitoring program governance. Among them is the IPMA Project Excellence Baseline (IPMA PEB), which focuses on project excellence and evaluating a program as a complex project. This model considers areas such as "People and Goals," "Processes and Resources," and "Project Outcomes." Another model is P3M3 – the Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model, which assesses the maturity of portfolio, program, and project management in an organization. The last well-known model is the Health Check within the MSP® standard, providing tools and frameworks for assessing and improving program management.

The IPMA PEB allows organizations to assess the extent to which their projects meet high standards of project and program management. This model focuses not only on project outcomes but also on processes, strategy, leadership, and stakeholder management (IPMA,

2016). It enables organizations to get a comprehensive view of project and program management and identify areas for improvement (Lee, et al., 2021). Moreover, using IPMA PEB can bring several benefits. Firstly, it helps identify strengths and weaknesses in projects, allowing organizations to focus on further improving their management practices. Secondly, IPMA PEB provides a framework and a uniform language for assessment, facilitating project comparison within or between organizations. Thirdly, it can serve as a developmental tool, enabling organizations to prioritize corrective actions to enhance the quality of program management.

In the context of program assessment using the IPMA PEB model, there are three approaches (IPMA, 2016):

1. Assessment of overall program management - This approach provides overall feedback on the evaluation of the program, without assessing individual projects within it. Results are evaluated only from the perspective of the program's overall business justification.
2. Assessment of a selected project within the program - According to the model, such a project should be evaluated similarly to an independent project. However, auditors are advised to precisely define the scope of the assessment first.
3. Assessment of the entire program, including subprograms and individual projects - This approach outlines three additional assessment possibilities:
  - Assessment of the entire program - Here, the program is evaluated as a complex project without breaking it down into individual elements.
  - Assessment of the overall level of program management combined with individual assessments of all projects - This approach combines the two previously described methods.
  - Assessment of the overall level of program management combined with individual assessments of a selected sample of projects - In this approach, the program assessment is conducted similarly to the previous mode but only applies to a selected group of projects.

The IPMA PEB model is a useful tool for assessing project success (Osmakov et al., 2019), but it faces criticism in program evaluation. Firstly, a program manages benefits based on outcomes from constituent projects. Program success assessment must consider whether specific benefits were achieved and contributed to the organization's strategic goals. The IPMA PEB model does not account for this, focusing only on outcomes from individual projects (Ding et al., 2022). Secondly, it mainly focuses on project excellence but does not consider specific organizational contexts affecting program management aspects. "IPMA PEB is based on the concept of individual and organizational competencies in project management (IPMA ICB and IPMA OCB), but it focuses solely on how all factors combine in a specific project, allowing for the measurement of its excellence" (IPMA, 2016). In summary, the IPMA PEB model treats a program as a mega-project, requiring the evaluation to consider benefit management, program specifics, and organizational context in assessing success.

P3M3 (Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model) is a model for assessing the maturity of portfolio, program, and project management in organizations. It is a comprehensive model developed by the British Office of Government Commerce (OGC). The purpose of P3M3 is to provide a framework of reference that can be used to determine an organization's capabilities in managing projects, programs, and portfolios (Juchniewicz, 2009). P3M3 was first developed in 2006, and the latest version was released in 2021 (AXCELOS, 2021).

The assessment of the maturity level has two possible modes and is based on 7 perspectives, which cover aspects such as: organizational governance, implementation control, benefit management, risk, stakeholders, finances, and resources. The first mode is self-assessment, which allows an organization to assess its maturity level in a short time. This is dedicated to small and medium-sized organizations that do not need to obtain an official project maturity certificate.

The second mode is the official method of maturity assessment, conducted by Accredited Consultants from Accredited Advisory Organizations. Furthermore, the maturity assessment of an organization can be conducted in any of the three areas: project management, program management, and portfolio management, provided certain requirements are met. If an organization decides to assess the maturity of program management, it must also evaluate project management. Similarly, if an organization wants to assess the maturity of portfolio management, it must conduct an assessment of both program and project management.

Although the P3M3 model provides organizations with guidelines and recommendations for improving the management of portfolios, programs, and projects (Bartolome, 2022), there are certain limitations that need to be considered. Within the P3M3 assessment, there is a category of "general attributes" that is evaluated in all three sub-models. However, there is controversy in both popular and academic discourse about whether these general attributes are the same in the context of program and portfolio management, which have different characteristics (Young et al., 2014; Afrazeh, Hajiyakhchali, 2017). There is evidence suggesting that maturity in these areas requires different skills than in project management (Miterev et al., 2016; Farid, 2021). For example, skills such as prioritization, decision-making, and balancing, which are key in program management, are not assessed by P3M3. Furthermore, organizational learning, strategic alignment, and support from top management are important factors that should be considered when examining an organization's capabilities but are not fully included in the P3M3 model (Young, et al., 2014).

The health check is a process of evaluating and diagnosing programs based on the principles and processes contained in the MSP standard. It aims to identify areas for improvement, assess the effectiveness of program management, and determine corrective actions to achieve better results (TSO, 2014).

The health check within MSP not only provides organizations with an objective assessment of their programs but also offers a range of benefits and opportunities for improvement. Firstly, the health check enables the identification of areas for improvement and the recognition of problems and challenges that the organization may face in program management (TSO, 2014). Additionally, the health check allows organizations to leverage industry best practices and expert knowledge through analysis, which is in line with the MSP methodology.

The health check, despite its numerous advantages, can also have some drawbacks. Firstly, it only refers to the MSP standard, which limits its universality. Secondly, it may be prone to subjective opinions and interpretations of the assessors, due to the lack of metrics that are available, for example, in the IPMA PEB model. There is a risk that the assessment results may be biased towards subjective preferences and not adequately reflect the actual state of the program. Thirdly, the health check does not include an assessment of competencies, focusing only on 7 governance themes and the course of transformation.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article focuses on the significance of program governance from multiple perspectives, starting with a clear definition of program governance, through identifying its key components, to a detailed analysis of governance evaluation models. This comprehensive analysis aimed to deepen the understanding of governance in the context of program management and its impact on management effectiveness.

The contribution of the article to program management theory lies in three aspects. First, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of program governance. Second, based on the analysis of literature, it identifies key areas of program governance both in terms of international standards and research conducted independently by various authors. Third, the analysis conducted indicated the need to develop a comprehensive model, a tool that allows for the assessment of program governance. Considering this, the development and testing of new tools and governance assessment models are recommended, which may better reflect dynamic business environments.

The article's contribution to the practice of program management is manifested through the analysis of practical applications of various methods for assessing program governance. It emphasizes how these tools help in identifying weaknesses in management, contributing to the optimization of processes and enhancing the effectiveness of programs, especially in changing business conditions. The article points out the practical benefits of effective governance assessment, facilitating decision-making and adjusting management strategies.

The main research limitations stem from the adopted methodological approach. The article is based on a literature review and descriptive research analysis, which may not capture the full spectrum of practical experiences and realities of program management in dynamic business environments. Consequently, it is recommended to expand the research to include empirical case studies, which can provide practical examples of applying program governance theory.

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