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Governance and Leadership in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Universities: Insights from Institutional Theory

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ABSTRACT

University governance has become a critical concern in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, due to bureaucratic control, political interference, and limited institutional autonomy. This study explores governance practices, leadership behaviors, and institutional challenges across six public universities in KP using a qualitative approach informed by Institutional Theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, and Directors of Quality Enhancement Cells. Thematic analysis revealed seven key themes: regulatory influence and bureaucratic oversight, organizational culture and normative practices, adoption of external best practices, leadership and stakeholder management, resource limitations and strategic planning, accountability and transparency, and change and innovation adoption. Findings indicate that governance effectiveness is shaped by coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, while participative leadership and strategic adoption of best practices facilitate better decision-making, transparency, and institutional development. The study contributes to understanding how governance reforms are implemented in provincial universities under complex socio-political and institutional constraints.

***Keywords**: University governance, Institutional autonomy, Leadership practices, Accountability, Higher education*

INTRODUCTION

Governance in higher education has emerged as a central concern for policymakers, administrators, and scholars worldwide, reflecting the growing complexity of universities' roles in society. Over the past decades, the traditional model of centralized state control over universities has gradually evolved toward governance frameworks emphasizing institutional autonomy, managerial efficiency, and performance-based accountability (Altbach, 2015; Clark, 1998). Historically, universities operated within rigid hierarchical structures, with state authorities directly overseeing administrative and academic functions (Baldridge, 1971; Clark, 1983). This form of governance prioritized conformity to state regulations and maintained academic activities within formalized bureaucratic procedures. However, global shifts, including the rise of

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globalization, the demand for accountability, and the expansion of higher education, have placed significant pressures on universities to adopt more flexible, responsive, and strategic governance models (Altbach, Reisberg, & de Wit, 2017; Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008).

In response to these pressures, universities are increasingly encouraged to balance institutional autonomy with regulatory oversight, integrate managerial practices into decision-making, and engage diverse stakeholders in governance processes (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Dill, 2014). The adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles has particularly influenced the operational structures of higher education institutions, emphasized efficiency, accountability, and competition while promoted strategic planning and performance evaluation (Bleiklie, 1994; de Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007). Clark's (1983) "triangle of coordination" underscores the complex interplay between the state, academic communities, and market forces, highlighting the tensions and synergies inherent in modern university governance. Likewise, the concept of "steering at a distance" illustrates how governments exert influence indirectly through accreditation mechanisms, funding conditions, and regulatory requirements, rather than through direct control (Ferlie et al., 2008; Olsen, 2007).

In developing countries, the implementation of these governance reforms faces distinct challenges, including limited fiscal autonomy, bureaucratic inertia, and political interference (Christensen, 2011; Khan & Ahmad, 2021). In Pakistan, higher education governance operates within a hybrid framework that combines formal institutional autonomy with substantial political and administrative oversight. While the Higher Education Commission (HEC) grants universities statutory independence, provincial authorities, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), exert significant influence over budget allocations, senior administrative appointments, and strategic planning decisions (Shah, 2017; HEC Pakistan, 2020). This dual system creates persistent tensions between formal governance structures and informal practices, often constraining institutional leadership in implementing strategic initiatives effectively (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

The governance landscape in KP is further complicated by regional disparities, socio-cultural norms, and resource limitations, which collectively shape institutional performance and decision-making (Maryam, Gullalie, Nosheen, & Begum, 2025; Misbah Nosheen, Maryam, Majeed, & Khan, 2025). Bureaucratic procedures and political patronage frequently intersect with formal statutory mechanisms, creating an environment where symbolic compliance with regulations may coexist with informal, politically mediated practices (Baldridge, 1971; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). University leadership in such contexts must navigate a complex network of stakeholders, balancing regulatory requirements, community expectations, and internal academic priorities (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2012; Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Institutional Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing governance and leadership in this context, offering insights into how universities respond to external pressures to maintain legitimacy and ensure operational continuity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). According to this theory, institutions are subject to three primary forms of pressure: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive pressures stem from legal, political, and administrative requirements, compelling compliance with external mandates (Tolbert, David, & Sine, 2011). Normative pressures emerge from professional standards, accreditation criteria, and

collective expectations within the academic community, guiding universities toward widely accepted practices (Meyer et al., 2007; Deem, 1998). Mimetic pressures involve the emulation of successful practices from peer institutions, helping universities navigate uncertainty and enhance legitimacy (Bleiklie, Enders, & Lepori, 2015; Musselin, 2018). In KP, these pressures manifest in the partial adoption of HEC policies, the replication of governance mechanisms from leading universities, and adherence to professional norms, often without substantive transformation of internal decision-making processes (Olsen, 2007; Whitley & Gläser, 2014).

Leadership practices play a crucial role in translating formal governance frameworks into effective institutional outcomes. Vice-chancellors, deans, and administrative officers determine the extent to which policies promoting transparency, accountability, and strategic development are implemented (Bolden et al., 2012; Misbah Nosheen, Muhammad Ali Gardezi, & Sadia Naz, 2025). Evidence from both global and South Asian contexts indicates that participative, transformational, and distributed leadership approaches enhance collaboration, trust, and institutional resilience, while transactional or bureaucratic leadership reinforces rigidity and inhibits change (Bolden et al., 2012; Shattock, 2006; Van Vught, 1989). In KP universities, frequent leadership transitions, politically influenced appointments, and limited professional development opportunities undermine the capacity for long-term strategic planning, reducing the effectiveness of governance reforms (Khan & Ahmad, 2021; Misbah Nosheen et al., 2025).

Resource limitations compound governance challenges, affecting the financial, human, and infrastructural capacities of institutions (Ferlie et al., 2008; Capano & Regini, 2014). Scarce budgets, insufficient faculty development programs, and bureaucratic delays constrain the ability of university administrators to implement strategic initiatives, often forcing a focus on immediate operational demands at the expense of long-term planning (Christensen, 2011; Enders, de Boer, & Weyer, 2013). Addressing these constraints is essential to ensure governance reforms are both feasible and sustainable, highlighting the need for policies that integrate structural, procedural, and resource dimensions.

Gender representation and inclusivity represent additional dimensions of governance influencing legitimacy and institutional performance. Female participation in leadership and decision-making bodies remains low in many KP universities, reflecting entrenched socio-cultural norms and structural barriers (Maryam et al., 2025; Nosheen et al., 2025). The limited representation of women restricts diverse perspectives in strategic decision-making and weakens efforts to foster inclusive governance practices. Institutional Theory suggests that normative pressures can either perpetuate or challenge these patterns, highlighting the importance of deliberate interventions such as leadership development programs and statutory representation quotas to enhance equity and participation (Nosheen et al., 2025).

Despite the increasing scholarly focus on higher education governance in Pakistan, research specifically examining provincial contexts such as KP remains limited. Most studies emphasize national reforms, policy evaluation, or quantitative performance metrics, often overlooking the qualitative experiences of administrators and faculty (Khan & Ahmad, 2021; Shah, 2017). This research gap underscores the need for empirically grounded, context-sensitive studies that explore how institutional pressures, leadership behaviors, political dynamics, and

resource limitations interact to shape governance outcomes. The present study aims to address this gap through a qualitative inquiry that examines governance practices, leadership behaviors, and institutional challenges across universities in KP, providing insights into the mechanisms that drive or constrain effective governance and leadership.

Through analyzing these dynamics through the perspective of Institutional Theory, the study highlights how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures influence governance and leadership outcomes in a provincial context characterized by political oversight, resource constraints, and socio-cultural particularities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). Understanding these interactions is essential for informing policies that promote institutional autonomy, strategic capacity, and inclusive governance while aligning with global standards and local realities. The findings of this research are intended to guide reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, and sustainability in higher education governance in KP, ultimately contributing to the long-term development of universities in the province.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of university governance has undergone significant transformation worldwide, evolving from centralized, state-dominated systems to more decentralized, managerial, and competitive arrangements (Clark, 1983; Musselin, 2004). Governance encompasses the formal and informal structures, decision-making processes, and stakeholder interactions that shape how universities are managed and held accountable (Marginson & Considine, 2000). In Pakistan—particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—governance has emerged as a critical concern due to persistent political interference, bureaucratic dominance, and restricted institutional autonomy (HEC, 2020).

Global Evolution of University Governance

Across the globe, higher education governance has been influenced by neoliberal reforms and the principles of New Public Management (NPM), shifting the balance from government control to shared and market-oriented governance (Olsen, 2007; De Boer et al., 2007). Clark's (1983) "triangle of coordination" illustrates the interplay among the state, the academic community, and the market, with varying levels of influence on institutional autonomy. Later, the notion of "steering at a distance" (Van Vught, 1989) described how governments maintain influence through funding, evaluation, and accreditation rather than direct control.

The growing importance of performance metrics, global rankings, and competitive funding models has turned universities into strategic actors pursuing efficiency and reputation (Enders et al., 2013). However, developing countries such as Pakistan continue to face challenges in adapting these global trends due to structural, financial, and cultural constraints (Altbach, 2015).

Governance Landscape in Pakistan

University governance in Pakistan reflects a hybrid arrangement—formal autonomy is granted, but strong informal control persists through political and bureaucratic mechanisms (Shah,

2017). Since the early 2000s, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has promoted reforms emphasizing quality assurance, institutional autonomy, and performance-based management. Yet, in provinces like KP, the Higher Education Department (HED) maintains extensive administrative and financial oversight, constraining universities' decision-making independence (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

This dual governance system—split between federal and provincial jurisdictions—often results in overlapping mandates, procedural ambiguities, and accountability gaps (Raza, 2019). Governing bodies such as syndicates and senates, which are intended to foster participatory governance, are frequently influenced by political patronage, reducing transparency and institutional efficiency (Shah & Amjad, 2020).

Governance Dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Universities

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa hosts more than 30 higher education institutions, each facing unique governance and leadership challenges. Persistent issues include politically motivated appointments, dependence on government funding, and limited fiscal discretion (Khan et al., 2022). Older universities like the University of Peshawar still operate under bureaucratic traditions, while newer institutions such as Hazara University and Abbottabad University of Science and Technology are experimenting with hybrid or semi-autonomous structures.

Studies (Ali & Jabeen, 2021) reveal that instability in leadership, inadequate financial planning, and inconsistent policy implementation undermine academic quality and research productivity. Additionally, socio-political dynamics—including regional disparities, tribal affiliations, and local patronage further complicate governance effectiveness and institutional accountability.

Institutional Theory and Governance Framework

Institutional Theory provides a valuable foundation for analyzing the governance of universities in KP. It posits that organizations seek legitimacy by aligning with established norms, societal expectations, and institutionalized practices, often beyond rational efficiency motives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). According to this perspective, universities adapt to three main types of institutional pressures:

i. Coercive pressures, derived from legal, political, and regulatory requirements imposed by state and provincial authorities.
ii. Normative pressures, emerging from professional norms, accreditation bodies, and academic standards.
iii. Mimetic pressures, which drive institutions to emulate successful models in order to enhance legitimacy.

In KP's higher education context, coercive pressures arise from directives by HED and HEC, compelling universities to standardize procedures. Mimetic influences push universities to adopt governance models similar to those used in Punjab or leading federal universities, while

normative expectations stem from accreditation councils and global quality benchmarks (Scott, 2014).

However, such pressures often produce what Meyer and Rowan (1977) termed "ceremonial conformity"—the adoption of modern governance structures symbolically, without deep organizational change. Consequently, universities may demonstrate formal compliance with reforms while continuing traditional, bureaucratic practices driven by patronage and political loyalty (Khan & Javed, 2022).

Leadership, Accountability, and Governance Outcomes

Leadership plays a decisive role in translating formal governance frameworks into effective institutional practices (Bolden et al., 2012). In KP universities, frequent changes in vice chancellors, politicized selection processes, and limited leadership development programs hinder consistent strategic direction. Effective governance requires transparent procedures, fiscal responsibility, and shared decision-making aligned with academic values (Hood, 1991).

Evidence from South Asian higher education suggests that transformational and participatory leadership approaches foster collaboration, trust, and innovation, whereas transactional or bureaucratic leadership perpetuates rigidity and resistance (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2019). The quality of governance, therefore, depends not only on institutional structures but also on the vision, integrity, and inclusiveness of university leadership.

Research Gap

Research on higher education governance in Pakistan has primarily emphasized national reforms, leaving provincial contexts such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa relatively underexplored. The complex interaction between local political structures, administrative dependencies, and limited institutional autonomy has not been adequately examined. Furthermore, existing studies tend to employ quantitative or policy-oriented analyses, with minimal qualitative exploration of how governance practices are perceived and enacted within universities.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative lens within the Institutional Theory framework. It investigates how coercive regulations, normative expectations, and mimetic influences shape governance patterns, leadership conduct, and institutional decision-making in universities across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study uses qualitative insights drawn from interviews with administrators and policymakers.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional theory is a research tradition that traces its origins back to foundational articles that discussed how organizational founding and change were driven less by functional considerations and more by symbolic actions and external influences than the theory at the time assumed (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). These articles drew on concepts of bounded rationality that are central to behavioral theories and sketched a broad range of potential research questions, but

much subsequent research drew away from the firm focus on behavioral theories of organization by emphasizing environmental influences such as the diffusion of new institutionalized practices among firms.

As institutional theory has grown, some branches have moved closer to behavioral theory. Direct dialogue between the perspectives has been started by researchers who have noted that the organizational change processes examined by behavioral theory are influenced by the institutional context (Wezel and Saka-Helmhout, 2006). A growing subfield of institutional theory concerns institutional logics, which are broadly (but not universally) shared assumptions and action patterns (Thornton, 1995). At the organization level, institutional logics can be seen as sources of managerial decision-making rules, and hence institutional logics research is related to research on the BTOF and evolutionary theory.

Institutional theory has also moved into examining the founding conditions for new firms (Tolbert et al., 2011). This work questions the conventional assumption that entrepreneurs are rationally able to locate opportunities, and it instead posits that key sources of organization founding activities are institutional features of the social group to which entrepreneurs belong or the symbolic environment they face. Like population ecology, this work moves the concerns for decision-making processes and bounded rationality to the stage of organizational founding.

Institutional Theory provides the foundation for this study. It explains how organizations—such as universities—conform to formal rules, cultural norms, and political expectations to gain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Three key mechanisms shape governance according to this theory:

i. Coercive pressures (laws, regulations, government control)
ii. Normative pressures (professional standards, leadership expectations)
iii. Mimetic pressures (copying successful institutional models)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine governance and leadership practices within public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). A qualitative approach was selected to capture detailed interpretations of leadership behavior and governance processes as experienced by senior university officials, allowing the study to account for institutional complexity and contextual variation.

Fieldwork was conducted in six public sector universities in KP, namely Hazara University, University of Malakand, University of Swabi, University of Haripur, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology (AUST), and Khushal Khan Khattak University. The study utilized purposive sampling to identify ten key informants. Participants were selected based on three criteria: holding a senior governance position (Vice Chancellor, Dean, Registrar, or Director of Quality Enhancement Cell), direct involvement in institutional policy formulation or implementation, and substantial professional experience in higher education administration. These

criteria ensured that participants had firsthand knowledge of governance structures and leadership practices.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on institutional governance, leadership challenges, and decision-making dynamics. This interview format enabled flexibility, allowing respondents to provide details drawn from their professional experiences. Interviews were conducted with informed consent and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis followed a thematic analytical framework. Initial coding was performed by closely reading interview transcripts to identify meaningful segments of text. These codes were then refined and organized into broader categories through iterative comparison across cases. In the final stage, core themes were developed that captured recurring governance and leadership patterns across institutions. To enhance analytical rigor, coding decisions were revisited multiple times to ensure coherence, and an audit trail documenting coding revisions was maintained. In addition, peer review of emerging themes was conducted to strengthen analytical reliability and reduce researcher bias.

Results and Discussion

The interview data were examined using thematic analysis to identify consistent patterns across responses from senior university officials in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Seven themes emerged that illuminate governance arrangements, leadership approaches, and institutional constraints. It is essential to state clearly that the analysis draws primarily on the views of senior administrators, producing a top-down interpretation of governance practices. While this perspective is valuable for understanding formal authority structures and policy rationales, it does not fully capture how governance decisions are perceived or experienced by faculty members, junior administrators, or students. This limitation narrows the analytical lens and is acknowledged in the interpretation of the findings.

Theme 1: Government Control and Regulatory Dependence

Participants repeatedly emphasized the strong influence of provincial authorities on university decision-making. Respondents described governance forums such as Senate and Syndicate as largely procedural, with limited scope for independent deliberation. One Vice-Chancellor explained that institutional decisions often depend on external approvals, delaying implementation. An administrative official similarly noted that routine matters frequently require clearance from multiple government offices. These accounts illustrate restricted institutional autonomy as viewed from senior management, while the downstream effects on academic units remain unexplored.

Theme 2: Institutional Norms and Embedded Practices

Interviewees highlighted that informal rules and long-standing traditions significantly shape governance behavior. A senior academic leader noted that many administrative practices

are culturally ingrained and resistant to reform. Participants also pointed to low female representation in decision-making bodies, attributed to entrenched social and organizational norms. However, the absence of perspectives from female faculty or junior staff limits insight into how such norms are negotiated or challenged within everyday institutional life.

Theme 3: Imitation of Established Models

Universities were reported to adopt policies and quality mechanisms modeled on reputed national and international institutions. A Quality Enhancement Cell director described benchmarking practices against high-performing universities to enhance credibility. Another respondent noted that initiatives proven successful elsewhere are often replicated. These narratives reflect institutional imitation as a governance strategy, yet the extent to which such practices improve teaching, learning, or student experience remains uncertain due to the narrow respondent base.

Theme 4: Leadership Mediation and Stakeholder Balance

Leadership was commonly described as a process of managing competing expectations among faculty, students, and regulatory bodies. Senior leaders emphasized negotiation and consensus-building as essential leadership skills. While these accounts present leadership as inclusive in intent, the lack of feedback from non-senior stakeholders makes it difficult to assess whether such inclusion is substantively realized at operational levels.

Theme 5: Resource Constraints and Strategic Limitations

Financial and staffing shortages were identified as persistent obstacles to institutional development. Participants reported that resource allocation is often delayed by administrative procedures, limiting the execution of strategic plans. Respondents stressed that many initiatives remain unimplemented due to inadequate funding and personnel. These findings reflect planning challenges from a managerial viewpoint, without capturing how such constraints affect academic delivery or student services.

Theme 6: Formal Accountability Mechanisms

Respondents acknowledged the presence of reporting and audit systems intended to ensure transparency. However, several participants indicated that these mechanisms are often treated as procedural requirements rather than tools for meaningful accountability. The analysis remains limited to administrative interpretations, as perspectives from those subject to these accountability systems were not included.

Theme 7: Resistance to Change and Innovation

Senior administrators reported that introducing institutional reforms or technological changes often encounters resistance. Participants emphasized that sustained leadership effort is required to encourage acceptance of new initiatives. While these accounts highlight leadership

challenges in driving change, the voices of staff and students—who are most affected by such reforms—are absent, constraining a full understanding of resistance dynamics.

The findings offer insight into governance and leadership from a decision-maker perspective, emphasizing regulatory constraints, leadership strategies, and institutional challenges. However, the study's exclusive reliance on senior administrative voices reinforces a hierarchical governance narrative, limiting its capacity to reflect governance experiences across multiple institutional layers. Future research should adopt a multi-level approach, incorporating faculty, junior administrators, and students to provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of governance in public universities.

DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed that university governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faces significant challenges shaped by structural, cultural, and resource-related factors. A primary theme that emerged is the influence of regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic oversight. Decisions at the university level are often constrained by dependence on provincial authorities, which creates delays and reduces administrative autonomy (Capano, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Khan & Ahmad, 2021). This aligns with institutional theory, which posits that coercive pressures from external authorities can shape organizational behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Interview participants highlighted that Senate and Syndicate meetings sometimes serve as symbolic exercises rather than forums for substantive decision-making, reinforcing the impact of external control and rigid formal structures (Baldridge, 1971; Scott, 2014).

Another significant theme is organizational culture and normative practices, particularly regarding gender representation. The analysis indicated that female participation in governance remains below 10%, reflecting deep-rooted gender norms and traditional expectations within academic institutions (Khan & Ahmad, 2021; Altbach et al., 2017). Such practices exemplify normative pressures, where adherence to conventional behaviors often constrains inclusivity and innovation (Meyer et al., 2007; Tolbert et al., 2011). These cultural patterns affect leadership styles and decision-making processes, highlighting the importance of promoting equity as a central governance objective (Shah, 2017).

External best practices and mimetic behaviors also emerged as a theme. Universities in the region frequently emulate successful international models to gain legitimacy, particularly through the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms and regulatory compliance standards (Enders et al., 2013; de Boer et al., 2007). This mimetic adoption often occurs under conditions of uncertainty, where institutions look to perceived exemplars to navigate complex governance challenges (Olsen, 2007; Wezel & Saka-Helmhout, 2006). Respondents noted that while such practices are implemented, they are not always internalized, leading to a superficial alignment with global norms (Shattock, 2014; Bleiklie et al., 2015).

Leadership style and stakeholder engagement were identified as a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness. Leaders who adopt participative approaches foster trust and collaboration among faculty and administrative staff, which improves coordination and policy

implementation (Bolden et al., 2012; Birnbaum, 1988; Clark, 1998). Interviewees reported that Vice-Chancellors who consult widely with stakeholders achieve better academic outcomes and create an environment conducive to shared decision-making (Dill, 2014; Marginson & Considine, 2000). This reflects the importance of distributed leadership in promoting organizational resilience and adaptability.

Resource limitations constitute another theme influencing governance and decision-making. Financial constraints, bureaucratic delays in fund allocation, and insufficient human resources were commonly cited as barriers to institutional development (Ferlie et al., 2008; Huisman, 2009). These constraints limit universities' capacity to implement strategic initiatives and highlight the interplay between material resources and organizational performance (Bleiklie, 1994; Capano & Regini, 2014). Interviewees emphasized that bureaucratic bottlenecks in financial management often reduce transparency, negatively affecting trust and accountability.

Accountability and transparency emerged as a separate theme. While formal oversight mechanisms exist, they are often procedural rather than substantive, resulting in superficial compliance (Shattock, 2006; Christensen, 2011). Faculty and administrative officers reported that governance structures are sometimes ceremonial, reinforcing Meyer and Rowan's (1977) argument that formal structures can function more as myths than as effective instruments for regulation. Strengthening transparency and embedding accountability into everyday practices are therefore critical for improving governance effectiveness (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Olsen, 2007).

Finally, institutional change and innovation adoption represent a key challenge. Resistance to reforms, slow implementation of technological tools, and reluctance to adopt modern management practices were identified as barriers to institutional transformation (Van Vught, 1989; Musselin, 2018; Paradeise et al., 2009). Effective change requires strategic leadership, participatory engagement, and alignment with local norms, demonstrating that institutional transformation is gradual and contingent upon negotiation with existing practices (Clark, 1983; Deem et al., 2007).

In summary, the findings highlight how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures collectively shape governance practices in KP universities. Structural constraints, cultural norms, resource limitations, and leadership approaches influence the extent to which transparency, accountability, and innovation are realized. Participative leadership, gender inclusivity, and strategic adoption of international best practices emerge as crucial pathways for enhancing governance effectiveness, in line with the theoretical insights of institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Wezel & Saka-Helmhout, 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

This study is designed to capture the perspectives of senior administrators who shape governance policy at a strategic level. While this provides valuable insights into leadership narratives and institutional pressures, it consequently adopts a 'top-down' viewpoint. The experiences of faculty members, junior administrators, and students who are directly affected by

these governance decisions are not represented. This is a recognized limitation of the present research. Future studies would greatly benefit from a multi-stakeholder approach to construct a more general understanding of how governance is both enacted and experienced across all levels of the university hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

University governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faces multifaceted challenges arising from political interference, bureaucratic oversight, and limited institutional independence. The study shows that governance effectiveness is influenced by external regulations, established norms, and the tendency of institutions to emulate successful models. Leadership approaches, particularly participative and inclusive styles, play a crucial role in improving decision-making, promoting transparency, and fostering institutional growth. Moreover, resource availability and organizational culture significantly affect the capacity of universities to implement reforms and sustain innovation. Overall, enhancing governance requires aligning formal policies with practical execution while addressing socio-political and structural constraints.

To strengthen governance in universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, several measures are recommended. Institutional autonomy should be enhanced by revising university statutes to reduce political and bureaucratic interference, allowing greater freedom in administrative and financial decision-making. Leadership development programs for Vice-Chancellors and Deans are essential to cultivate strategic, ethical, and participative management skills. Promoting gender inclusivity by ensuring meaningful representation of women in governing bodies can improve equity and decision-making. The adoption of digital tools and transparent systems, such as ERP platforms and financial dashboards, will increase efficiency and accountability. Additionally, establishing a provincial oversight body can monitor compliance with governance standards, while encouraging universities to adopt proven practices from successful institutions will support innovation, quality improvement, and sustainable institutional growth.

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