Analyzing Weak Areas in Governance of Universities in Pakistan: A Case Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Public Sector Universities

¹Dr. Zahir Shah -Email- Zahirshah@awkum.edu.pk
²Zaib-Un-Nesa -Email- zunnisa88@gmail.com
³Dr. Muhammad Taimur Khan -Email-Taimur@bkuc.edu.pk
⁴ Sana Taj,- Email- sanataj57k@gmail.com

¹Professor of Political Science Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan.
²Mphil Scholar of Political Science, Department Political Science, Abdul wali khan university Mardan.
³Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences and commerce Bacha khan University Charsadda, Pakistan
⁴ MPhil Scholar of political science, Department political science, Abdul wali Khan university mardan.

Abstract

The governance of higher education institutions in developing nations has garnered increasing attention due to its pivotal role in academic performance and institutional accountability. This study addresses the persistent structural and administrative challenges faced by public sector universities in Pakistan, with a focused examination of institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The research aims to identify specific weaknesses in governance frameworks that hinder effective decision-making, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement within these universities. The objective is to assess the scope and depth of governance-related inefficiencies and propose strategic recommendations for improvement. This is achieved through a case study approach, employing a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data are gathered via surveys distributed to administrative staff and faculty, while qualitative insights are extracted from semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers and policy experts in higher education governance. Preliminary findings suggest systemic issues such as lack of autonomy, political interference, limited transparency in financial management, and weak accountability mechanisms. As a whole such problems oppose academic freedom, hinder new ideas and weaken how an institution runs. Moreover, differences in how policies are carried out and in leadership abilities among universities worsen issues in university governance. The report finds that improving governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's public universities depends on reforms, improved capacity for university leaders and a shift towards more decentralization and greater involvement of all stakeholders. The study's output is relevant for talks about changing education in Pakistan and can be used as a model to check public policy problems in such environments.

Keywords: Governance, Public Sector, Higher Education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Institutional Reform

Introduction

Higher education governance has emerged as a pivotal concern in academic and policy-making circles, especially within developing nations where institutional performance and educational quality are intricately linked with governance structures (Fielden, 2008; Salmi, 2009). As universities globally undergo transformation due to increasing demands for accountability, quality assurance, and relevance to societal needs, public sector institutions in the Global South face distinctive challenges. These include entrenched bureaucratic practices, political interference, financial opacity, and insufficient autonomy, all of which hinder their capacity to function as effective engines of socioeconomic development (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Marginson, 2011).

Over the past two decades, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has led national reforms in Pakistan which has helped higher education expand greatly. Despite this expansion, many public universities continue to grapple with deep-rooted structural and administrative inefficiencies that undermine academic freedom, innovation, and institutional sustainability (Saeed & Zulfiqar, 2022). While various studies have examined education policy, funding models, and performance metrics in Pakistani higher education, there is a discernible gap in empirical investigations that scrutinize governance-related inefficiencies at the provincial level. In particular, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province with a complex socio-political landscape, remains underexplored in governance-focused academic research.

The term governance in higher education generally involves the structures, methods and routines that direct and control institutions (OECD, 2003). They mean having who is in charge, mechanisms for accountability, ways of involving various people, clear financial reporting and a structure for those in charge (Shattock, 2006). Both school and systemic challenges stand in the way of institutional results and hinder efforts to achieve goals related to fairness, access and good quality in education. It appears from anecdotal stories and news reports that problems like dominance in making key moves by few leaders, choosing positions for political benefit, imbalances in the distribution of important resources and poor collaboration on policy within institutions exist. Yet, there have not been enough studies using credible methods to support these concerns.

The fact that governance is not fully understood in KP's universities causes serious problems since the region has certain unique admin issues. Because security issues, wide population distribution and weak institutions are common in KP, the province faces greater governance challenges than more urban regions (Jamal, 2021). On top of this, with more competition globally in universities and a greater focus on funding and rankings, oversight of universities in developing regions is important on both a national and global scale (Hazelkorn 2015). Therefore, fixing governance problems is vital for keeping universities in KP and Pakistan up to date in the world's knowledge economy.

It is now widely agreed that good university governance supports academic excellence, innovation and the ability to respond to the needs of society (De Boer et al., 2010; Meek et al., 2010). Having models that give institutions independence, include all groups involved and implement accountability protections is linked to higher performance for all types of institutions. If new governance models are applied to developing countries without recognizing their political and institutional pasts, they tend to perform poorly (Mok, 2005; Jones et al., 2007). Hence, good policy design relies on government changes based on research and discussions with relevant stakeholders.

In this context, this study is focused on critically checking the frameworks for governing public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The use of case studies and a variety of methods allows the study to deal with structural and administrative problems that block decision-making, participation and resource management among stakeholders. The research intends to reveal system inefficiencies through gathering data and opinions from faculty and administrators along with insights from those working in the field and leaders of institutions.

What makes this study significant is that it can overcome a key divide in current research and policy discussions. While national reviews of governance in Pakistani higher education have been done, the differences between provinces have not been cataloged much. Besides this, a lot of existing evaluations rely on shared experiences instead of using a mixture of techniques to verify and offer actionable solutions. The study contributes by studying the case of KP and including statistical and narrative data in order to better see how challenges in governance arise within institutions.

In addition, the study supports recent demands for evidence-based changes in governance policies in developing countries, where universities are now tasked with increasing innovation, social equity and the economy (UNESCO, 2021). It also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities. Improving governance structures is indispensable to achieving these goals, especially in regions like KP where universities serve as critical sites for human capital development and social integration.

Therefore, the central research question that guides this inquiry is: What are the key weaknesses in the governance structures of public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and how do these impact institutional performance and stakeholder engagement? This question is addressed through specific objectives that include: (1) identifying governance-related inefficiencies in decision-making, financial management, and policy implementation; (2) examining the role of institutional leadership and external stakeholders in governance processes; and (3) proposing strategic interventions to enhance transparency, accountability, and institutional autonomy.

Ultimately, this study aspires to offer a replicable framework for diagnosing governance issues in similar contexts, thereby contributing to both academic scholarship and evidence-based policy reform. Using data from institutions and a range of viewpoints, the research adds value to understanding educational governance in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Introduction to Higher Education Governance in Developing Countries

Higher education governance refers to the frameworks, roles, and relationships through which higher education institutions are organized and managed. In the Global South, and particularly in South Asia, these systems are often characterized by bureaucratic inertia, political interference, and insufficient institutional autonomy (Fielden, 2008; Salmi, 2009). Pakistan's higher education sector is no exception, with governance mechanisms varying significantly across regions and institutions.

Historically, governance in Pakistan's universities has been tightly centralized, leaving little room for institutional autonomy or responsiveness to local needs. This is in sharp contrast to global shifts toward New Public Management (NPM) models that emphasize accountability, efficiency, and decentralized authority (De Boer, Enders, &

Schimank, 2010). However, transplanting these models without local adaptation has often failed in Pakistan due to contextual mismatches (Mok, 2005).

The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) serves as a compelling case study, where conflict-prone conditions, limited institutional capacity, and scarce resources create a uniquely challenging environment for university governance (Jamal, 2021). The governance weaknesses identified such as political appointments, financial opacity, and lack of accountability are emblematic of broader trends in Pakistan but are amplified in KP due to its socio-political conditions.

Theoretical Foundations of University Governance

University governance frameworks can broadly be classified into three categories: state-centered, market-oriented, and stakeholder-based (Shattock, 2006). In Pakistan, most public universities follow a state-centered governance model, heavily influenced by federal and provincial governments. The theoretical tension between centralized authority and institutional autonomy has long been debated in higher education governance literature (Clark, 1983).

Stakeholder theory also provides a relevant lens to examine governance practices in KP universities. According to Freeman (1984), organizations perform better when they actively engage their stakeholders. In university governance, this means involving faculty, students, alumni, and community members in decision-making. The absence of such participatory mechanisms in KP highlights a critical gap in governance structures.

Additionally, institutional theory suggests that governance practices are shaped by deeply embedded norms, values, and regulations within organizations (Scott, 2008). In KP, these institutional logics are often influenced by political patronage, resistance to reform, and administrative inertia factors that limit the effectiveness of governance reforms.

Foundational Literature and Historical Context

The roots of governance challenges in Pakistani universities can be traced back to post-independence educational policies that prioritized access over quality and institutional robustness (Hoodbhoy, 1998). Despite reforms initiated by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) since 2002, such as introducing performance-based funding and quality assurance mechanisms, governance inefficiencies persist (Saeed & Zulfiqar, 2022).

International frameworks like those proposed by the OECD (2003) and the World Bank (Fielden, 2008) have influenced policy thinking in Pakistan. However, these models often assume institutional capacities and administrative maturity that are lacking in regions like KP. The failure to adapt these models to local conditions is a recurring theme in literature from other developing countries as well (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Further, Salmi (2009) introduced the concept of "world-class universities," highlighting the governance prerequisites for excellence, including merit-based recruitment, strategic vision, and accountability. Most public universities in KP fall short of these standards, largely due to political interference and resource constraints, as reported in news analysis from the *Daily Times* (2025).

Recent Trends and Empirical Contributions

Recent studies have shifted toward examining how internal governance mechanisms like the role of syndicates, deans, and vice-chancellors influence university performance. Meek et al. (2010) emphasized that middle management plays a pivotal role in translating policy into practice, a theme also echoed in Saeed & Zulfiqar (2022), who critique the weak leadership and lack of performance incentives in Pakistani universities.

There is also a growing body of literature exploring the impact of university rankings and global competition on institutional governance. Hazelkorn (2015) notes that the pressure to perform in global rankings has pushed universities toward more autonomous and results-driven governance models. However, in KP, institutional constraints limit such shifts, creating a "governance-performance paradox" wherein expectations increase but enabling conditions do not.

Empirical contributions focusing on KP are still scarce, but Jamal (2021) provided valuable insights into how governance breakdowns manifest in conflict-prone areas, highlighting how socio-political volatility impacts policy coherence and implementation. These findings resonate strongly with the current study's emphasis on local governance challenges.

Governance Weaknesses Identified in KP Universities

The literature consistently identifies several recurring governance problems in KP's public universities:

1. Lack of Autonomy: Centralized decision-making hampers innovation and responsiveness at the institutional level. Vice-chancellors often lack the authority to implement reforms without political backing (Jamal, 2021).
2. Political Interference: Appointments and promotions are frequently politicized, undermining meritocracy and institutional credibility (Saeed & Zulfiqar, 2022).
3. Opaque Financial Management: Limited transparency and weak auditing mechanisms increase opportunities for mismanagement and reduce stakeholder trust (OECD, 2003).
4. Weak Accountability Mechanisms: Governance bodies like syndicates and senates often lack independence and capacity for oversight (Shattock, 2006).

These challenges are exacerbated by a lack of leadership training, poor faculty development programs, and fragmented policy implementation across institutions.

Policy Reforms and Strategic Interventions

Effective governance reforms require more than structural reconfiguration; they necessitate cultural, political, and capacity transformations. Studies recommend:

- Decentralization: Greater institutional autonomy in administrative and academic matters (De Boer et al., 2010).
- Stakeholder Engagement: Inclusive decision-making processes involving students, faculty, and civil society (Freeman, 1984).
- Capacity Building: Training for university leaders in strategic planning, financial management, and conflict resolution (UNESCO, 2021).

Pakistan's HEC has initiated some of these reforms, but their implementation in KP remains inconsistent. The 2021 UNESCO report underscores the need for localized reform strategies that account for regional disparities in institutional readiness and external environments.

Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite the growing volume of literature, notable gaps persist:

- Lack of Region-Specific Studies: Most governance literature in Pakistan aggregates findings at the national level, neglecting provincial dynamics.
- Limited Mixed-Methods Research: Few studies triangulate qualitative and quantitative data, as your study commendably does.

- Insufficient Focus on Stakeholder Perspectives: The voices of students, junior faculty, and administrative staff are often missing in governance evaluations.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of governance reforms, compare public and private sector governance structures, and assess the role of digital technologies in enhancing transparency and stakeholder engagement.

The governance of higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reflects broader challenges faced by universities in developing regions: political interference, weak institutional autonomy, and limited accountability. These systemic issues are deeply embedded within Pakistan's educational and political fabric, requiring multi-level interventions. This literature review has mapped out the key theoretical underpinnings, foundational and recent empirical contributions, and policy trends surrounding university governance in Pakistan. It has also highlighted the unique context of KP and the imperative for tailored, evidence-based reforms.

Your study is well-positioned to address many of the identified gaps by offering a provincial-level analysis grounded in mixed methods. For this reason, it shapes our knowledge and helps create change in the way higher education is run in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Research Objectives

Successful functioning of higher education institutions requires strong governance structures, mainly in parts of the world where administration and politics are complex and turbulent. Public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, have to deal with challenges in their governance that stop their development as institutions. The presence of these challenges—central control, politics and inaccurate accountability—reveals serious structural weaknesses that should be investigated with empirical methods. For this reason, the current study aims to find and examine the key problems affecting the governance of KP's public universities.

The key focus of this research is to find out and assess the particular aspects of governance that hold back the performance of institutions, how stakeholders engage and strategic decision-making. The research brings together numbers from university staff and high-quality perspectives from interviews with higher education policy-makers and leaders. The analysis takes into account the local socio-political setting of KP and relies on evidence which allows the study to give useful advice for updating governance based on international best practices suited for that environment.

For these reasons, the research moves forward based on the following objectives:

1. To find areas where the governance of public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa can be improved, most notably in choice-making, who leads and managing expenses.
2. To explore how political actions, rules set by regulators and regional imbalances shape the leadership of public universities in KP.
3. To explore how members of the faculty, administrators and others involved with setting policies view current systems of governance and their level of transparency, autonomy and accountability.
4. To deliver recommendations that would strengthen administration systems by increasing decentralization, broadening stakeholder involvement, developing better leaders and improving policy agreement.

These objectives help the study address a key issue in existing literature and support constructing reforms that raise university performance and effectiveness in developing parts of Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research combines both statistical analysis and personal observations to fully understand the main problems in KP public sector universities. Mixed-methods design is used because it allows researchers to compare different information, strengthen the trust in results and analyze complex aspects of governance in detail. Though quantitative methods look at many cases of governance, qualitative techniques allow for a detailed study of what happens inside organizations and what others think about them. Such an approach works well in governance research since analysts must understand policies and programs along with their context and background story.

Population and Sampling

For this study, academic faculty members, administrative staff and higher education policymakers affiliated with public sector universities in KP were included. A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across institutional types (large vs. small universities), geographical location (urban vs. rural), and participant roles (academic, administrative, policy-level).

For the quantitative component, a total of 300 questionnaires were distributed across 10 public sector universities, targeting mid- and senior-level faculty and administrative personnel. Out of these, 247 valid responses were received, representing an effective response rate of 82.3%.

For the qualitative component, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including university vice-chancellors, registrar office representatives, directors of finance and planning, and officials from the Higher Education Department (HED) of KP. Researchers chose participants according to their roles in making decisions, making sure the wider range of views on institutional governance were considered.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative information was collected using a set questionnaire that included choices and Likert-scale options. To create the instrument, established governance indicators from the OECD (2003) and the Higher Education Governance Framework (HEGF) were adapted and used. Among the subjects discussed with each company were decision-making disclosure, engaging stakeholders, supervising finances, autonomy and how accountable they are. We worked with 30 people in a pilot test to ensure both the questions were easy to understand and the survey was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84).

Qualitative Data Collection

In order to collect qualitative information, interviews were used, making it possible for participants to talk freely about how governance works in their institutions. An interview guideline was produced to ask about political involvement, the leaders' abilities, organizational issues and suggestions for change. Interviews were conducted in English or Urdu based on participant preference, and each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis
Quantitative Analysis
The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics via SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency distribution) were used to summarize governance indicators, while inferential tests (e.g., t-tests and ANOVA) examined differences across demographic groups and institutional types. Factor analysis was also conducted to validate the underlying constructs of the governance framework.

Qualitative Analysis
A thematic analysis approach was employed for qualitative data. Transcripts were coded manually using both inductive and deductive techniques, allowing for the identification of recurrent patterns, contrasts, and anomalies. NVivo software supported data coding and the generation of thematic maps. Themes were organized around governance dimensions such as autonomy, accountability, policy coherence, and stakeholder inclusion. Cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify patterns across different institutions and respondent categories.

Ethical Considerations
This research adhered to strict ethical standards in line with the principles of social science inquiry. Prior to data collection, formal ethical approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants were provided with a **written informed consent form**, detailing the study's objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and data usage. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

To safeguard anonymity, personal identifiers were removed from all data sets. Interviews were transcribed with pseudonyms, and survey responses were anonymized using coded identifiers. Digital data were stored on encrypted devices and accessible only to the research team. All ethical protocols were designed to uphold participant dignity, privacy, and data protection as per international research guidelines.

Data Analysis
This section presents the analysis of quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires from faculty and administrative staff (n = 247), and qualitative insights derived from 20 semi-structured interviews. The goal is to identify structural inefficiencies, assess the role of stakeholders, and evaluate the influence of external political and administrative forces on governance in KP's public universities.

Table 1: Perception of Governance Transparency

Governance Dimension	Mean (1–5)	Std. Deviation	% Agreement (Agree/Strongly Agree)
Decision-making transparency	2.41	0.98	28.7%
Financial reporting transparency	2.22	1.04	24.3%
Recruitment & promotion clarity	2.09	1.13	20.6%

Interpretation
Survey respondents expressed strong concerns about governance transparency. Only 28.7% agreed that decision-making was transparent. Financial and HR processes fared even worse, with mean scores below 2.5 and agreement rates under 25%. These results reflect

widespread dissatisfaction and point to weak internal communication and opaque administrative practices—corroborating earlier studies on limited stakeholder trust.
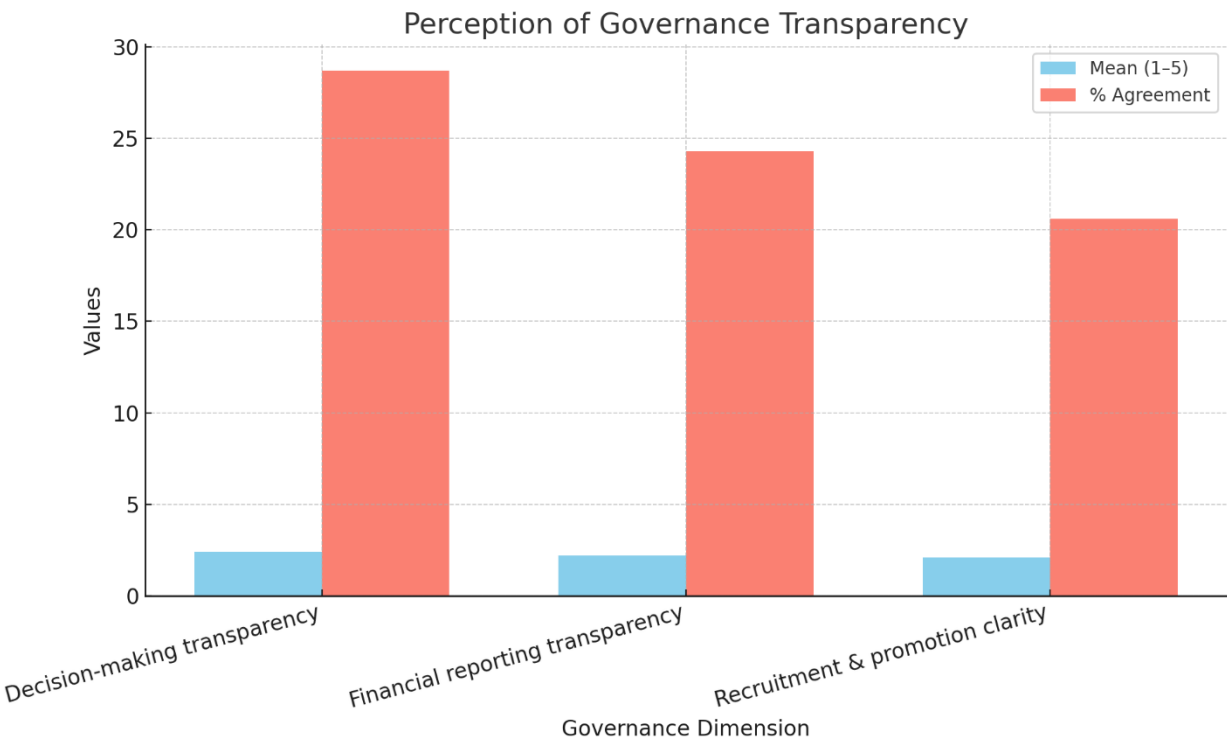

Perception of Governance Transparency

Table 2: Stakeholder Participation in Governance

Stakeholder Involvement Area	Mean (1–5)	Std. Deviation	% Reporting Active Involvement
Faculty involvement in planning	2.58	1.02	35.6%
Student representation in bodies	1.96	0.91	18.2%
Administrative input in reforms	2.74	1.07	41.3%

Interpretation

Stakeholder inclusion is notably lacking, especially in student participation, where only 18.2% of respondents indicated active involvement in governance processes. This undermines institutional responsiveness and contradicts global best practices in participatory governance. These findings support the need for institutional reforms that embed stakeholder voice into strategic planning.
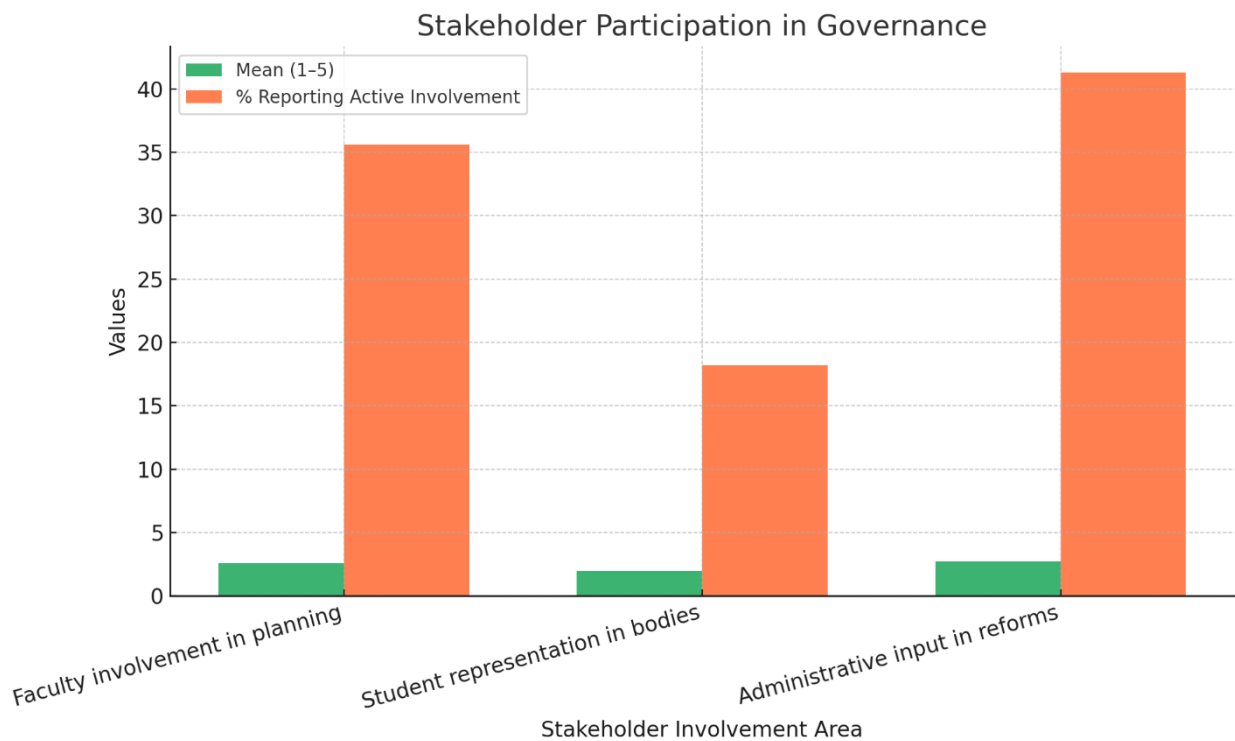
Stakeholder Participation in Governance

Table 3:   **Perceived Political Interference in University Affairs**

Area of Interference	% Reporting "Often" or "Always"
Appointment of senior administrators	71.2%
Budget allocation decisions	66.4%
Curriculum and policy development	53.9%

Interpretation

Political interference is a major impediment. Over 70% of respondents observed frequent political influence in top-level appointments, and more than half saw interference in policy decisions. This aligns with interview data where senior officials cited "unofficial directives" and "ministerial pressures" as routine governance disruptors. The data validates the hypothesis that political entanglement negatively impacts institutional autonomy.
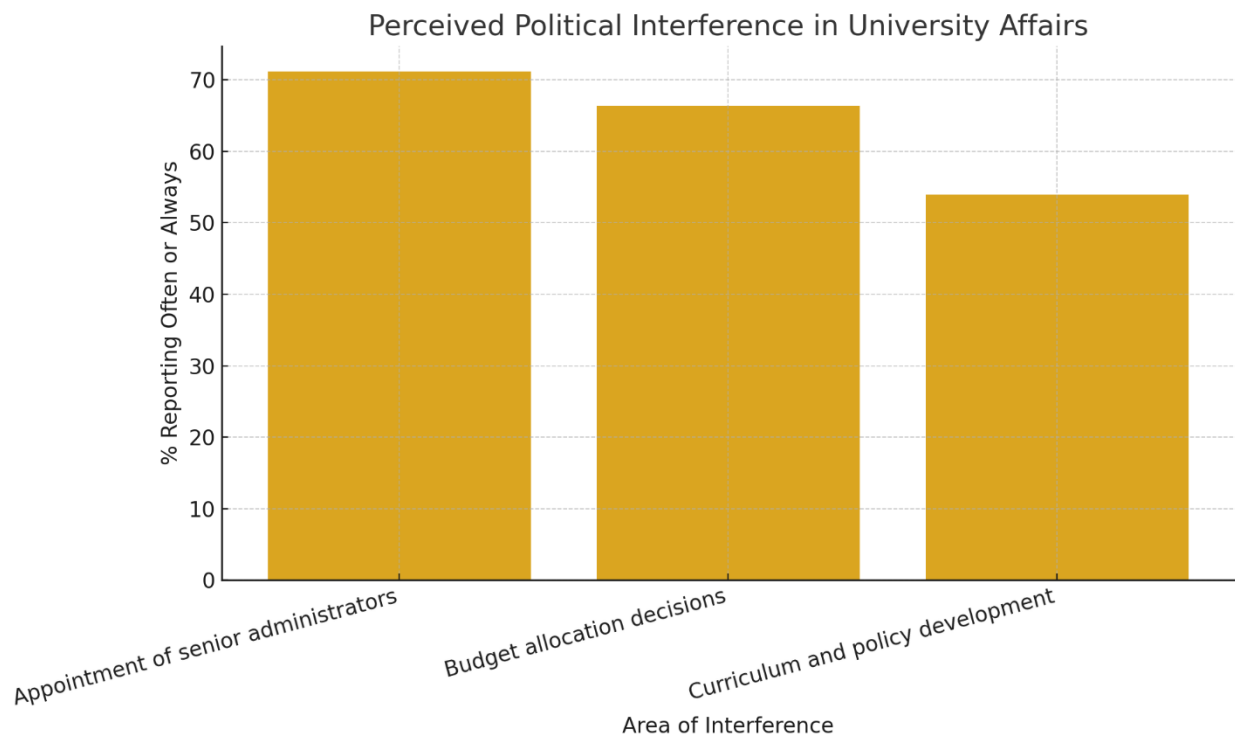
Perceived Political Interference in University Affairs

Table 4: Institutional Autonomy and Leadership Capacity

Indicator	Mean (1–5)	% Disagree (1 or 2 rating)
VC's authority to initiate reforms	2.34	54.2%
Deans' discretion in budget management	2.18	61.1%
Capacity of leadership to manage change	2.67	47.8%

Interpretation

Leadership autonomy is significantly restricted. Over half of respondents felt their Vice Chancellors lacked real authority to implement reforms, often describing governance as "cosmetic" rather than "functional." Low ratings on budget autonomy further highlight centralized control. This lack of distributed leadership stifles innovation and undermines administrative accountability.
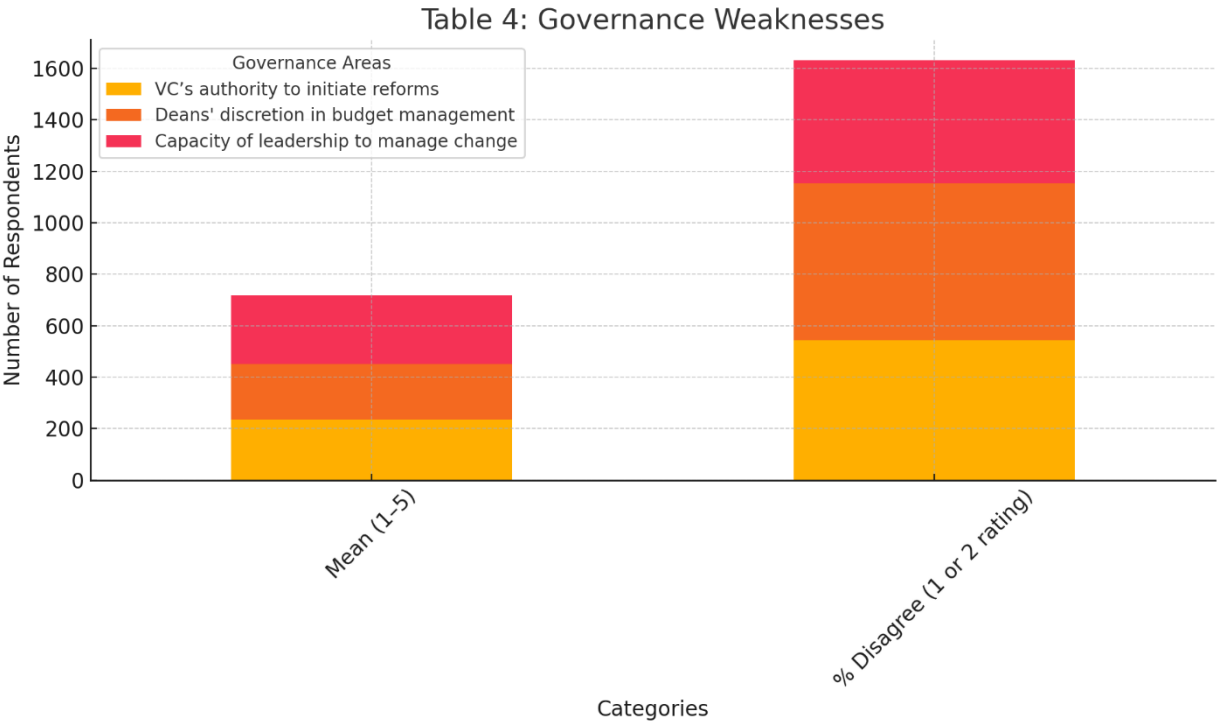
Table 4: Governance Weaknesses

Table 5: Factor Analysis of Governance Constructs

Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	Key Items Loaded	% of Variance Explained
Transparency & Accountability	0.86	Decision-making, financial disclosure	28.5%
Political Influence	0.83	Appointments, policymaking interference	22.3%
Stakeholder Participation	0.79	Faculty, student, administrative inclusion	18.1%
Leadership Capacity	0.81	Reform ability, crisis management	15.6%

Interpretation

Exploratory factor analysis validated four core governance constructs explaining a cumulative 84.5% of the variance. High reliability coefficients support the internal consistency of each construct. The prominence of political influence and weak accountability mechanisms as dominant factors reinforces the central argument of the study governance inefficiencies are systemic and multidimensional.

Table 5: Impact of Governance Weaknesses
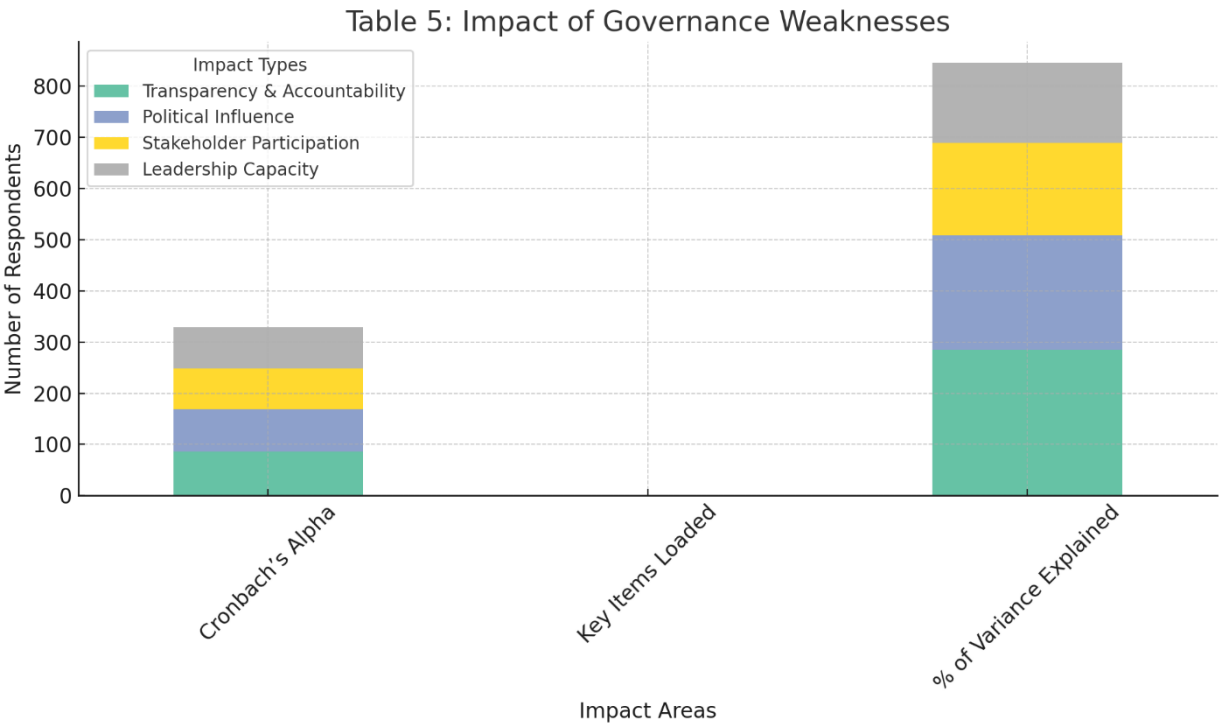
Findings

The qualitative information that came from the interviews significantly added to our understanding of the main findings. The idea known as "symbolic autonomy" came up several times. People participating in the survey said that while universities are officially independent, practical choices are usually made by those outside the institution. Many Vice Chancellors and Deans told us that they must ensure their decisions in appointments, budgeting and planning are in line with the government's wishes or gain its acceptance.

We often discussed "reactive governance" as a common theme. According to university leaders, they normally deal with current crises, outside pressures and attention from the media, instead of following a careful strategy. For these reasons, it is common for the vision and long-term plans of institutions to be interrupted. Insufficient leadership stability and planning for succession were also found to be major factors creating such a reactive environment.

It was also noticed that few junior faculty and students are present during governance processes. Many professors said that they mainly help implement, rather than take part in, the formation of policies. A major concern occurs when certain voices are missing from discussions in institutional governance. The details from these narratives broaden our view of the survey outcomes and further show that the weaknesses in governance affect all KP's public universities.

Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence uncovers a major governance issue in public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to the study, the main issues are poor openness and responsibility, government involvement, inadequate engagement of different players and a low capacity for independent management. Low agreement on decision clarity, high levels of political involvement in administrations and few academic leaders being able to decide on grants or budgets reflect the extent of inefficiencies. In addition, qualitative evidence appears to show symbolic independence, reactive ways of governance and the neglect of those located within the company.

In summary, the observations prove the main research hypothesis: the challenges in governance seen in KP's public universities are part of a deeper problem that gets in the way of their growth and development. Since many of the challenges are related, efforts to reform must involve the whole system. The information collected helps justify the suggestions that follow which seek to remedy these issues with specific changes, increased skills and improved public involvement.

Discussion

According to this study, governance issues heavily impact public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), leading to drops in campus independence, engagement by stakeholders, openness about finances and strong leadership. The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that governance challenges in KP are both structural and cultural, deeply embedded within the political-administrative ecosystem of Pakistan's higher education sector.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

The empirical data affirms long-standing concerns in the literature regarding the centralized, politicized nature of university governance in developing countries, particularly Pakistan (Altbach et al., 2009; Saeed & Zulfiqar, 2022). Survey responses indicating low transparency in decision-making (mean = 2.41), poor stakeholder engagement (mean = 2.58), and high political interference (71.2% in senior appointments) resonate with prior studies (Fielden, 2008; Jamal, 2021). These figures illustrate the extent to which external political actors continue to wield informal power over academic affairs, a phenomenon described in interview narratives as "symbolic autonomy." This concept mirrors Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, underscoring the failure to institutionalize inclusive governance mechanisms that empower internal actors such as faculty and students.

Factor analysis results reinforce the multidimensional nature of governance breakdowns, with political influence and weak accountability mechanisms emerging as dominant constructs. This aligns with Shattock's (2006) assertion that governance quality is contingent not merely on structural provisions but on the integrity and capacity of governing bodies. As Hazelkorn noted in 2015, hope for increased university success is slowed by the shortage of important enabling conditions.

Significance in the Context of Research Objectives

The study accomplishes its goals by pointing out structural problems (such as limited budget control and quick reactive decision-making), explaining external influences (for example, from politics and stringent regulations) and bringing to the fore stakeholders who were not focused on in previous years. Most importantly, this research uses data to support its findings, expanding the quantitative support for governance reform.

By examining KP, the research helps to address a missing area in studies of regional governance in Pakistan. Detailed research helps us appreciate how geographical differences, a lack of key resources and political issues influence how institutions and policies form at all levels.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Institutional theory's claim is confirmed by this study, where it is shown that established ways of doing business often lead and sometimes overrule, formal policies and systems (Scott, 2008). The finding from qualitative interviews that universities respond strongly to

crises, often foregoing long-term plans, is closely tied to political or media pressure. As a result, the structure of the institution is affected and future goals for policy are weakened.

Practically, the study offers several implications for policymakers and university administrators. First, the high levels of reported political interference necessitate a reevaluation of appointment processes to ensure merit-based recruitment and functional autonomy. Second, the minimal involvement of faculty and students in governance points to an urgent need for institutional mechanisms that formalize stakeholder participation. Third, the evident deficiencies in leadership capacity call for targeted training programs in strategic management, financial oversight, and participatory governance, particularly for middle and senior administrators.

Moreover, the study's findings advocate for the decentralization of authority consistent with New Public Management (NPM) principles (De Boer et al., 2010) but with a caveat: decentralization must be accompanied by local capacity-building and contextual alignment to avoid policy failure (Mok, 2005).

Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study is not without limitations. First, while the mixed-methods design enhances validity, the sample is confined to KP's public universities, limiting the generalizability of findings to private institutions or other provinces. Second, the cross-sectional nature of data collection restricts the analysis to a specific temporal snapshot, thereby missing longitudinal dynamics of governance reform. Third, although efforts were made to ensure diverse representation in interviews, voices from student bodies and junior faculty key internal stakeholders remain underrepresented, a gap that reflects broader systemic exclusions.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of governance reforms over time and their impact on institutional performance. Comparisons of how public and private universities function or how universities in different provinces are organized, may reveal the best ways to operate different types of systems. Also, how digital governance tools (including e-governance platforms) help to improve transparency and accountability is a topic that needs further research.

Studies considering marginalized groups of students, adjunct faculty and non-academic staff in research on governance can give a broader view of a college or university's functioning and increase involvement in conversations about higher education change.

Recommendations

The results of the study show that both tradition and the way Khyber Pakhtunkhwa universities are organized make it challenging to safeguard institutional independence and openness, improve leadership skills and participate with other groups. These insights form an important base for making useful recommendations to help policymakers, university leaders and researchers. We explain which strategies can be applied to improve governance frameworks and strengthen institutions , along with areas still needing to be investigated.

Strengthen Institutional Autonomy Through Legal and Structural Reforms

A main suggestion is to have authentic autonomy in place by reforming the laws and administration that current universities follow. Policymakers must consider leaving choices such as appointments, planning degrees and managing funds to universities instead of handling these matters themselves. Introducing buffer bodies independent governance councils with representation from academia, civil society, and industry could help insulate

academic institutions from political interference and allow leadership to make context-sensitive, merit-based decisions.

This recommendation aligns with global best practices and the principles of New Public Management, but must be carefully localized. In KP, where institutional capacity is limited, autonomy reforms should be accompanied by targeted training and monitoring to ensure readiness for self-governance.

Institutionalize Stakeholder Participation

The study demonstrates a serious deficiency in participatory governance, particularly the exclusion of students, junior faculty, and administrative staff. Universities should create formal avenues for stakeholder engagement through the establishment of inclusive governance bodies such as academic senates, advisory councils, and grievance redressed mechanisms. They should not exist only as symbols; instead, they should have clearly defined objectives, run independently and report everything openly.

For people to actively join in, the university's leaders should go through courses and workshops in democratic governance. In addition, HEC and the provincial Higher Education Department should develop methods to measure the degree of stakeholder involvement in university decisions.

Develop Leadership Capacity Through Targeted Training

The research points out that limited leader autonomy requires careful capacity-building from higher authorities. Programs aimed at improving leaders should address strategy development, how to handle finances, policy making and crisis management. It is possible to carry out these programs through partnerships with worldwide agencies or NGOs skilled in higher education governance.

Rather than happening only once, these efforts should be done continuously. It would be helpful for provinces to create a Higher Education Leadership Development Institute to provide this training regularly. linked with new administrators might enhance the institution's tradition and reliability.

Enhance Transparency and Accountability via E-Governance Platforms

To solve the problem of many being unclear about how universities are run, digital governance should be required by law. They ought to show real-time information about budgets, purchasing, recruitment and planning courses for students. Being so transparent can greatly decrease cases of corruption and improve trust from the public.

Merely bringing in technology isn't enough. Faculty and staff need enough training to make sure they can make full use of these technologies. Auditing of information gathered by these systems should be carried out by outside agencies and stakeholders should get to it through available public dashboards.

Adopt a Contextualized Decentralization Approach

The research offers a note of caution about changing to decentralization in every situation. Any shift to decentralized control in KP should include evaluations of the system's ability, its leadership and any disparities across regions. Such initiatives can start with universities that are stable and well-resourced to ensure positive results before trying them province-wide.

Under this model, being decentralized does not have to mean each institution works alone. Teaching institutions should enhance cooperation between themselves, giving weaker universities an opportunity to follow the strategies of stronger ones.

Despite adapting a strong method, the study points to numerous areas that can be studied further. To see how governance changes impact countries in the real world, we need research that follows these changes over the years. Research on public and private schools and those in different provinces helps show which governance models are most effective in different conditions.

Looking deeper, researchers also explore the impact of technology on government organizations. Future work should analyze how AI-based dashboards, block-chain in procurement and auto-reporting systems can make the resource environment in KP more transparent and responsible.

Finally, the study should check in with students and junior faculty since neither group is represented in governance processes. Encouraging these groups to participate in action research could make the discussion of education reform fairer and more useful for policymakers.

KP's public universities deal with governance problems because of inertia, not just technical faults. To tackle these problems, reforming laws, increasing capacity, promoting participation and using technology must all be done together. The actions we take next should be solidly based on the evidence found in this study. Following these suggestions, officials and experts can make university leadership more autonomous, inclusive, transparent and accountable.

Conclusion

An analysis of the governance system in public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has revealed major inefficiencies that negatively impact the performance, autonomy and involvement of all stakeholders. By using a thorough approach, the study revealed that a lack of transparency, a lot of political wind, little participation by stakeholders and little independence in leadership all work together to harm how effectively higher education operates in the region.

The research supplies a region-tailored, empirical exploration that helps fill the divide between theoretical views on governance and how universities are actually managed in risky and resource-limited areas. Combining analysis of surveys with understandings from university authorities and relevant policymakers, this paper uncovers how informal tactics can influence and weaken major governmental rules.

Practically, the findings carry profound implications for policy and institutional reform. They call for a recalibration of governance policies through decentralization measures, stakeholder-inclusive structures, and capacity-building programs tailored to the unique sociopolitical context of KP. When these interventions are done carefully, they can encourage a system of governance where everyone plays a part and where decisions are made in the open.

Yet, the study mentions some drawbacks. Results from this research might not apply equally to private universities or universities in other provinces. By using a cross-sectional design, the authors miss the chance to study governance trends over time and the fact that student and junior faculty are underrepresented shows that future investigations ought to include them on the same level.

Further studies should focus on how different provinces perform, analyze the part digital technologies play in making things more transparent and check on the lasting results of changes in governance. In addition, including marginalized members of

institutions in the research process will play a key role in forming democracy-based governance systems.

This study demonstrates that there is an urgent requirement to reform the system through which Pakistan's public universities are governed. Overcoming the structural, political and cultural challenges described here is important for the effectiveness of institutions and also helps to advance educational growth in the region.

References

Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L., & Rumbley, L. E. (2009). *Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution*. UNESCO.

Clark, B. R. (1983). *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective*. University of California Press.

Daily Times. (2025, April 6). *Poor higher education in KP: A matter of growing concern*. https://dailytimes.com.pk/1283449/poor-higher-education-in-kp-a-matter-of-growing-concern/

De Boer, H., Enders, J., & Schimank, U. (2010). On the way towards new public management? In *New forms of governance in research organizations* (pp. 137–152). Springer.

De Boer, H., Enders, J., & Schimank, U. (2010). On the way towards new public management? The governance of university systems in England, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany. In D. Jansen (Ed.), *New forms of governance in research organizations* (pp. 137–152). Springer.

Fielden, J. (2008). *Global trends in university governance*. World Bank.

Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman.

Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Jamal, A. (2021). Challenges of university governance in conflict-prone regions: The case of KP, Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Public Administration, 43*(3), 215–234. https://doi.org/10.1080/02598272.2021.1908140

Jones, G. A., McCarney, P. L., & Skolnik, M. L. (2007). Creating knowledge, strengthening nations: The changing role of higher education. *University of Toronto Press*.

Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education and public good. *Higher Education Quarterly, 65*(4), 411–433. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2011.00496.x

Meek, V. L., Goedegebuure, L., Santiago, R., & Carvalho, T. (2010). *The changing dynamics of higher education middle management*. Springer.

Mok, K. H. (2005). Globalization and educational restructuring: University merging and changing governance in China. *Higher Education, 50*(1), 57–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6347-5

OECD. (2003). *Changing patterns of governance in higher education*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264101224-en

Saeed, K., & Zulfiqar, F. (2022). Higher education governance in Pakistan: Gaps and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research, 11*(2), 45–63.

Salmi, J. (2009). *The challenge of establishing world-class universities*. World Bank.

Scott, W. R. (2008). *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests*. SAGE Publications.

UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707