

# Governance Practices at Higher Education in Punjab and Sindh to Achieve the Goals of Higher Education Policies

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<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.4.42>

## Abstract

*Higher education is one of the primary sources of national development in this century. However, the concentration in terms of quality and relevance in achieving the goals of Pakistani institutions has been challenging. This research investigates the governance practice in the higher education commissions (HECs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) of Punjab and Sindh provinces, assessing their alignment with national higher education policies. Using a qualitative, phenomenological research approach, it reflects on the life experiences of stakeholders, such as HEC officials from Pakistan and its provinces and representatives of provincial HEIs. Data was collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, offering insights into governance structures and practices. The research findings highlighted the positive aspects: commitment to improving educational standards, fostering academic integrity, and enhancing institutional autonomy with transparent decision-making and collaborative governance that engages stakeholders like faculty, staff, and students, which are increasingly recognized as important. However, resistance to change, bureaucratic red tape, and inadequate funding hinder the vision for effective governance in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Punjab and Sindh. A holistic governance approach, integrating policy frameworks with practical implementation strategies, is advocated to overcome these challenges. By emphasizing stakeholder engagement and ongoing dialogue, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers and educational leaders, promoting reforms to create a more dynamic and innovative higher education governance system in Punjab and Sindh.*

**Keywords:** Governance Practices, Higher Education, Higher Education Policies.

## Introduction

As a developing country, Pakistan faces significant political and economic uncertainty, impacting various sectors, including higher education, since independence in 1947, when there was only one public university (Punjab University) and no private universities. Higher education institutions have expanded considerably over the past three decades. Despite this growth, the quality of education has not been consistently monitored, raising concerns about governance and management, particularly in the public sector (Malik & Javed. 2023). Pakistan's higher education governance has come under increasing scrutiny, particularly as the nation strives to align its system with global standards and national development goals. The governance framework in HEIs is

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critical for implementing policies aimed at improving educational quality, access, and research output (Ahmed & Siddiqui, 2023). A complex interplay between regulatory bodies, academic institutions, and policy frameworks characterizes higher education governance. Historically, governance has faced several challenges, including political interference, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a lack of institutional autonomy. Political patronage influences university appointments and resource allocation, undermining academic freedom and effectiveness (Qureshi & Qazi, 2020). Additionally, bureaucratic red tape and centralized decision-making lead to delays and inefficiencies in policy implementation (Memon, 2019). Governance structures in Pakistani higher education often lack transparency and accountability, encountering financial mismanagement issues and inadequate performance evaluation mechanisms (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

The higher education landscape has been shaped by policy initiatives to reform the sector. Key documents include the Higher Education Commission's Vision 2025 and various National Education Policies (NEPs), which outline strategic goals for enhancing quality and accessibility (HEC, 2019). However, the implementation of these policies has often been hampered by governance issues. For example, while advocating for increased institutional autonomy, many universities remain tightly controlled by central authorities (Bashir & Iqbal, 2022). This misalignment between policy intentions and practical governance practices has resulted in varying degrees of success across provinces.

Governance in higher education institutions encompasses a range of activities, including decision-making processes, leadership dynamics, and resource allocation. Rauf (2022) describes governance as complex interactions among various stakeholders that significantly affect educational policy implementation and outcomes. This complexity necessitates a detailed exploration of these elements within the distinct governance structures and practices at HECs and HEIs. Recent research emphasizes the importance of effective governance in achieving educational policy goals. Shah and Ali (2021) argue that alignment between governance structures and policy objectives is crucial for translating educational reforms into practice. Without strong governance frameworks, the potential for achieving policy goals is diminished. However, this underscores the need for a comprehensive analysis of how governance practices in Punjab and Sindh influence the realization of higher education policy. A comparative study across regions can reveal disparities and guide targeted interventions (Zafar, 2023). By focusing on Punjab and Sindh, this research aimed to enhance understanding of how regional governance practices affect policy implementation.

The evolving landscape of higher education in Pakistan further highlights the relevance of this study. Hussain (2019) emphasizes that understanding the alignment of governance practices with policy objectives is increasingly essential to ensure educational reforms achieve their intended impact. This research identified potential bottlenecks and inefficiencies that could hinder the successful implementation of higher education policies. The study aimed to provide insights into governance practices within HEIs in Punjab and Sindh, offering evidence-based recommendations for enhancing governance effectiveness. As Khan and Zaman (2020) note, understanding and improving governance practices is crucial for addressing the unique challenges HEIs face in contributing to national development goals.

## Literature Review

### Concept of Governance

Governance refers to a government's capacity to develop and apply guidelines and provide facilities, irrespective of whether it is elected or not (UNDP, 2023). In the context of universities, governance involves carefully establishing and administering institutional policies. It encompasses universities' operational frameworks, organizational structures, and interactions with external stakeholders to achieve higher education objectives (Wilkesmann & Schmid (2020). Governance in higher education involves the structures, policies, and processes through which universities manage their operations and interact with internal and external stakeholders. Recent discussions emphasize its role in adapting to changing academic and societal demands while ensuring accountability and quality assurance (Austin & Jones, 2024).

There are two prominent governance models in higher education: the state control model, characterized by centralized authority over institutional operations, and the state supervision model, which provides institutions with autonomy while maintaining oversight for strategic alignment. These models are underpinned by key governance principles such as transparency, accountability, adherence to the rule of law, and corruption control, collectively ensuring effective management and trust in the educational system (UNESCO, 2024; Austin & Jones, 2024).

The literature emphasizes that no universally accepted model of good governance exists; however, accountability, transparency, and effectiveness remain integral to sound governance frameworks. Recent reports by the OECD stress that modern governance requires adaptability and inclusivity to meet evolving challenges, such as digital transformation and equitable policy implementation (OECD, 2023). Governance encompasses relationships within institutions, external stakeholders, and their interrelations. Modern university governance integrates transparency, effectiveness, and accountability into decision-making, resource allocation, and operational strategies. Recent literature emphasizes shifting governance structures under global pressures like New Public Management and neoliberal policies, advocating for diverse governance models suited to varying sociopolitical and historical contexts (Shin & Jones, 2022).

### Higher Education

Higher education, encompassing post-secondary education such as universities and colleges, is critical to individual and societal progress. It contributes to intellectual growth, social mobility, and economic advancement. Higher education serves as a powerful tool for enhancing social mobility and contributes significantly to economic growth by equipping individuals with specialized skills that drive innovation and productivity. Bernanke (2007) emphasizes that investments in education are among the most effective investments a society can make, underscoring the economic benefits of investing in education. Research shows that rates of return for graduates of higher education are the highest in the educational system, with an average increase in earnings of 17% (UNESCO, 2012). The World Bank Group asserts that quality institutes, expanded choices, and equitable access to higher education contribute significantly to poverty eradication and economic development (Draft National Education Policy 2017). Higher education fosters informed citizens better prepared to participate in democratic processes and address societal issues. Nussbaum (2010) states that the purpose of education is not merely to make a living but to enrich lives, highlighting that higher education aims to develop individuals who think critically and contribute thoughtfully to civic life.

### **Higher Education Policies**

Higher education policies encompass regulations and guidelines designed to ensure the effective functioning of HEIs. They include funding mechanisms, accreditation standards, admissions policies, and academic standards. Effective policies are essential for creating an equitable and high-quality educational environment (Perkins & Smith, 2020). These policies influence access to education, quality of instruction, and alignment of academic programs with societal needs. A primary objective of higher education policies is to enhance access and equity. Policies supporting financial aid and scholarships are critical for providing opportunities to students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Perkins and Smith (2020) noted that financial aid programs help reduce barriers to higher education for low-income students, promoting greater social mobility. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion policies contribute to a more equitable educational environment. Initiatives such as affirmative action and outreach programs for underrepresented groups enhance the campus culture for all students (Massey et al. 2003).

### **Higher Education in Pakistan**

Higher education in Pakistan encompasses university education and degree-awarding bodies. It includes a bachelor's program after two years of intermediate college education and a master's program spanning two years (Education Policy 2009). Historically, the fundamental role of Pakistani universities was to provide education and produce trained graduates like engineers and doctors for global work. In the 1940s-1970s, universities played significant roles in political movements, making political leaders over time. Higher education reforms during Pervez Musharraf's era prioritized research, leading to the establishment of the HEC to develop standards for measuring research performance (HEC, 2024).

Economic reviews indicate that universities increased from 58 in 2000 to 259 in 2024, with Islamabad alone hosting 29 universities. HEC reforms allowed the public and private sectors to establish universities, raising access to higher education from 2.6% in 2002 to 10% in 2024. Academic subjects surged from 234 to 1301 in the same period. While these developments are noteworthy, governance in higher education remains a concern. The existing higher education structure emphasizes the need for reform and improvements in governance to achieve national and international standards of quality and accountability (Iqbal & Khan, 2020).

### **Establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC)**

In September 2002, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established through the Steering Committee on Higher Education (SCHE) endorsements. HEC is an autonomous body responsible for ensuring quality assurance in higher education institutions in Pakistan and provides funding to public sector universities from the federal government. Its mandate includes promoting research, education, and development, enabling institutions to contribute to Pakistan's social and economic growth. The HEC has formed a quality assurance department to evaluate universities and support their development into international-level institutions (Quality Assurance Division, HEC, 2011). The HEC operates as an external regulatory body while emphasizing the importance of internal controls within universities, particularly concerning their administration and governance structures.

### **Functions of HEC in Governance of Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan**

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan regulates, accredits, and funds higher education institutions. As of 2024, Pakistan has over 200 universities, with 140 public and

approximately 60 private institutions. These universities are distributed across provinces, reflecting the government's ongoing efforts to expand access to higher education. Notable concentrations include Punjab, about 80 universities, Sindh, with 60, and smaller numbers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and other regions. The central HEC aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education, emphasizing national priorities like research excellence and internationalization, while provincial HECs focus on regional needs such as improving access in underserved areas (Chaudhury & Arif, 2020). A study by Iqbal and Khan (2020) discusses how the central HEC's strategic goals, which are enhancing research output and fostering innovation, align with the objectives of provincial HECs. However, this ensures coherence between central policies and provincial implementations.

## **Governance System at Higher Education in Pakistan**

### **Governance Structures and Frameworks**

Governance in higher education encompasses a range of structures and frameworks that guide decision-making and policy implementation. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) functions as the federal regulatory authority in Pakistan, formulating policies and ensuring quality across institutions while provincial HECs and universities execute these frameworks. Recent governance measures include the Affiliation Policy 2024, which mandates transparency, accountability, and quality assurance across affiliated institutions, aligning with global standards to address governance challenges (HEC, 2024). Additionally, HEC has emphasized enhancing university-industry collaboration and entrepreneurship initiatives to meet economic demands and improve higher education outcomes (Ahmed, 2024; Daily Times, 2024).

### **Central vs. Provincial Governances**

The governance of higher education in Pakistan involves a dual system of oversight. The central HEC formulates national policies for implementation nationwide (Ali & Shah, 2018), while provincial HECs adapt these policies to meet regional needs (Khan & Ahmed, 2018). This structure aims to address regional disparities but can lead to inconsistencies in policy application.

### **Policy Development and Implementation**

The HEC is responsible for developing higher education policies that address national priorities, including quality assurance and access (HEC, 2009). The process involves extensive consultations with stakeholders, including academic leaders and industry representatives (Iqbal & Khan, 2020). Provincial HECs adapt these policies to local contexts, focusing on regional educational needs (Shah & Ali, 2022).

### **Governance Practices at the University Level**

Universities in Pakistan possess a degree of autonomy for managing their affairs, including academic and financial management (Gul, 2014). However, this autonomy is exercised within the guidelines set by the HEC. The balance between independence and accountability is essential for compliance with national standards while addressing local needs (Ahmad & Ali, 2019). Quality assurance is a primary focus of the HEC's regulatory framework, requiring universities to adhere to curriculum development guidelines and faculty qualifications (HEC, 2022). Research by Ali and Ahmed (2020) highlights the challenges universities face in meeting these standards due to resource constraints. Funding for universities is derived from federal and provincial budgets and allocated based on criteria like student enrollment (Shah & Ali, 2022). Effective financial



management is crucial for transparency and accountability in public fund usage (Khan & Ahmed, 2018).

Governance in higher education encompasses systems, structures, and processes for managing educational institutions. It includes decision-making, accountability mechanisms, and stakeholder relationships (Kogan, 2020). Effective governance enables institutions to meet policy goals and adapt to educational needs. Marginson (2021) emphasizes the need to balance institutional autonomy and accountability. In the U.S., governance emphasizes institutional autonomy with robust accountability measures, requiring institutions to meet accreditation standards and report performance metrics (Ewell, 2020). In Pakistan, higher education institutions (HEIs) governance involves a multi-tiered structure that includes provincial governments and regulatory authorities. The HEC formulates educational policies, while provincial governments manage administrative aspects (Ahmed & Ali, 2019). In Punjab, governance is influenced by the Punjab Higher Education Commission (PHEC), which ensures the alignment of institutional goals with educational policies. A study by Khan and Rizvi (2021) highlights PHEC's reforms to improve academic quality, though challenges like bureaucratic delays persist. In Sindh, the governance of higher education is overseen by the Sindh Higher Education Commission (SHEC), which has initiated quality assurance mechanisms but faces challenges, including political interference (Shah & Baig, 2020).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite extensive research on higher education governance, gaps remain, particularly regarding governance practices at HECs and institutions in Punjab and Sindh. Most studies focus on general governance issues, lacking detailed comparative analyses between the provinces. Additionally, more empirical research is needed to assess the impact of recent reforms on governance practices and educational outcomes. There is also a lack of qualitative study exploring the experiences of key informants in HECs and university staff, which is crucial for understanding the practical realities of governance and policy implementation. Addressing these gaps is vital for developing a comprehensive understanding of governance practices in higher education in Punjab and Sindh, ultimately contributing to the effectiveness of governance frameworks and achieving educational policy goals.

### **Research Questions**

1. How are the policies and implementation strategies developed at Central and Provincial HECs?
2. How do the governing bodies at the university level practice their autonomy under the policies and guidelines of HECs?
3. How are quality assurance guidelines given by HECs enacted in the work environment of universities?
4. How could governance practices be improved to attain the aims of educational policies for higher education?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The research's purpose was to explore key governance practices in higher education commissions (HECs) and universities of Sindh and Punjab to achieve higher education goals. Organizational differences within Pakistan's higher education system have resulted in complex governance practices. The study examined the roles of federal and provincial HECs, collaborations among them, and the governance and management of universities.

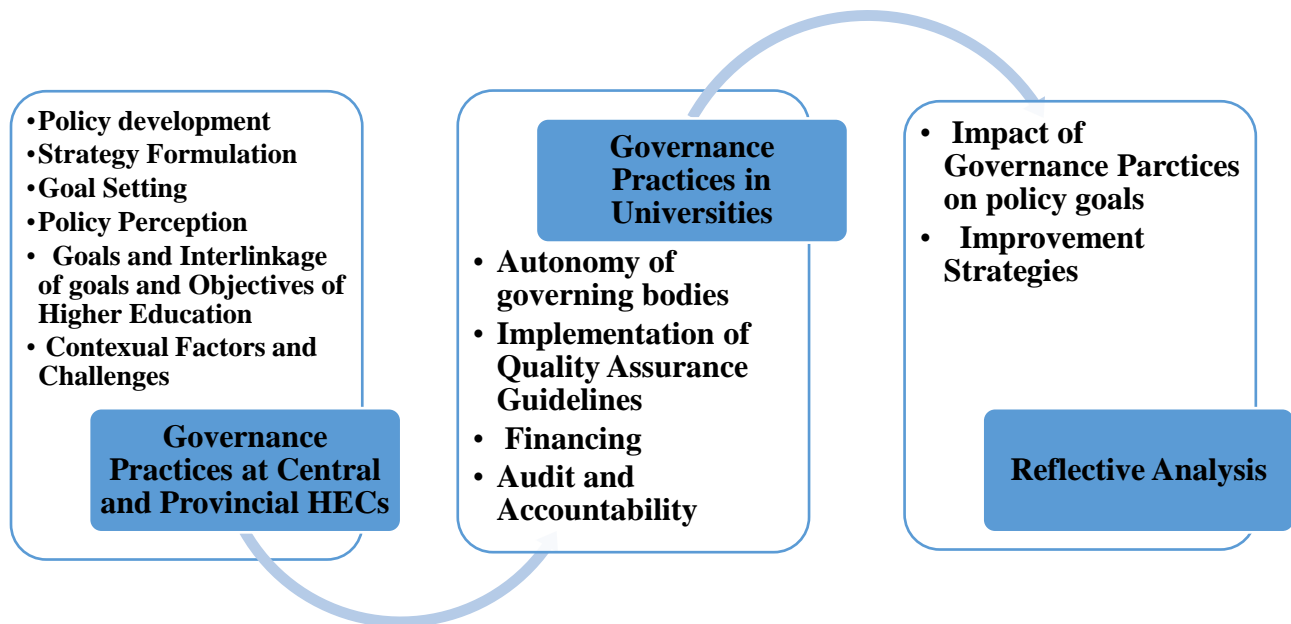
### Research Problem

Higher education significantly impacts a region's intellectual and socioeconomic landscape, with effective governance being vital for realizing the goals of higher education policies (Morrow, 2009). Despite significant investments and policy frameworks to enhance quality and accessibility in higher education (World Bank, 2014), there is a need to assess governance in Punjab and Sindh's institutions to identify challenges and opportunities (Ali & Khan, 2017). The lack of comprehensive research explicitly focused on governance practices in these regions and their influence on the implementation of higher education policies prompted this study (Shah & Ali, 2021). This research investigates how governance practices affect policy goal achievement and suggests enhancements for better outcomes (Ahmed, 2015). The study delves into decision-making processes, leadership structures, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement to identify inefficiencies hindering effective policy implementation.

### Conceptual Framework

Considering the purpose of the study and research questions, the following conceptual framework has been developed for the proposed research study. This conceptual framework is derived from the theoretical framework based on the literature review, research problem, and purpose of the study, which is reflected in Figure 1. It provides a structured approach to conducting and understanding research. Following this conceptual framework, we can systematically collect and analyze qualitative data from Central HECs, provincial HECs, and higher education institutions in Sindh and Punjab. It addresses the research questions on policy development and policy implementations in higher education in Punjab and Sindh to achieve the goals of higher education policies.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study**



## Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach, and the research design was phenomenological to examine how the participants experienced and understood governance practices in the context of higher learning institutions. This approach is suitable for describing and explaining integrated phenomena, as phenomenology is most helpful in revealing how people define specific experiences (Ben-Eliyahu, 2017). Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich insights, including registrars, vice-chancellors (VCs), deans, treasurers, and quality assurance directors from universities in Sindh and Punjab, as well as directors/deputy directors from HECs. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were employed for data collection, enabling an exploration of governance practices and their effects on achieving the higher education policy goals.

The researcher selected qualitative research based on the nature of the research questions and the purpose of the study. Qualitative research was chosen because it can comprehensively describe and explain a phenomenon. The phenomenological design aimed to gain deep insight into the higher education stakeholders' perspectives on governance practices and models at higher education institutions. Ben-Eliyahu (2017) asserted that phenomenology best explains a phenomenon in detail and in-depth. The research was conducted in two large provinces of Pakistan, with the maximum number of higher education institutions and provincial HECs. There were 231 universities in the country, with 141 in the public sector and 90 in the private sector. The total number of universities in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh was 146, accounting for 63% of the total universities in Pakistan. The research was conducted at public sector universities selected based on the following criteria:

1. General Education (One University from Sindh and one from Punjab)
2. Professional Education (One University from Sindh and one from Punjab)
3. Women's Universities (One University from Sindh and one from Punjab)

Additionally, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan, HEC Punjab, and HEC Sindh, governing bodies of higher educational institutions, were also research sites of this study. Six universities' governance structures and practices, three from Punjab and three from Sindh were analyzed.

Research Participants were chosen from research sites where maximum information about the research study could be collected. The research sites had to possess all the necessary characteristics, i.e., experience with the governing practices regarding higher education institutions that the researcher needed to become familiar with. For example, the research sites included actors involved in the implementation of education policies regarding governance in universities. This ensured that all stakeholders involved in policy-making and policy implementation for higher education in Pakistan were represented.

For document analysis, the researcher relied on archival databases, library catalogues, online sources and physical archives to gather relevant documents. Tools such as content analysis frameworks helped systematically categorize and interpret the data. For Text analysis, AI tools were also employed to perform word frequency or sentiment analysis. Data extraction involved using coding schemes and annotation tools to classify and highlight significant document content. Techniques such as thematic and comparative analysis allowed the researcher to identify patterns and contextualize the information historically.

In contrast, interviews necessitated different tools: preparation involved creating semi-structured interview guides/protocols and obtaining consent through forms. Recording devices captured participants' responses, and note-taking tools were also used during interviews. Ethical



considerations, including confidentiality agreements and debriefing forms, ensured participant privacy and data integrity.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic and content analyses. Furthermore, thematic analysis, as defined by Burney, 2008 was used to compare findings, regularities and associations in the interview extracts. These activities comprised data familiarization, coding, generation of themes, and refining of themes. This text analysis was conducted based on the recommendations by Creswell (2002) for content analysis of documents when researchers systematically code, categorize, and interpret the text to develop significant patterns. Both approaches helped to make thorough conclusions based on the analysis of the collected data. The same data analysis procedures were applied to policy documents, and the emerging themes reflected the study's conceptual framework to handle the raised research questions.

All the ethical issues were taken keenly, starting with the consent of the participants, confidentiality during data collection and the need to maintain the integrity of the data collected. Interviews were conducted with recording devices and notes taken; all procedures were conducted ethically. The use of multiple data sources, the employability of reliable analyses, and ethical behaviours increased the reliability and validity of the study. In conclusion, it was established that the research methodology was appropriate and selected to achieve the study goals. The technique of participant selection, the observed research sites, and the data collection tools used helped to identify and understand governance practices within HEIs effectively. In addition, better explaining the choice of university and describing particular AI utilities would significantly enhance the methodology. In conclusion, the approach proved helpful in providing an in-depth understanding of governance practices to add to the existing knowledge in the field.

## **Findings of the Study**

### **Development of Policies and Strategies**

The governance practices of higher education commissions (HECs) in Punjab and Sindh are pivotal for achieving higher education goals in Pakistan. This exploration reveals a complex and multifaceted development of policies and strategies at both central and Provincial HECs, structured around several interlinked dimensions.

### **Needs Assessment and Stakeholder Engagement**

It is the foundation of the policy development process. This phase begins with a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies gaps and trends within higher education by analyzing enrollment rates, educational quality, infrastructure, and graduate employment outcomes. Engaging diverse stakeholders, including universities, faculty, students, industry representatives, and governmental bodies, fosters a sense of ownership and accountability in the governance process. Conducting a needs assessment is the first step in identifying specific areas for improvement in the quality assurance framework (Director of Quality Assurance Division). This assessment helps pinpoint where policies are most needed and ensures that they address relevant issues. Through collaborative consultations, HECs can better understand the challenges and opportunities that vary across regions, enabling tailored policy responses that align with local needs.

### **Policy Formulation and Approval**

This stage involves crafting policies based on the insights gathered. This process requires extensive research and analysis of best practices and local contexts, culminating in draft policies that undergo rigorous internal and external reviews. Once formulated, these proposed policies are submitted to

the government for approval, ensuring they align with national educational objectives. Transparency in publicizing these approved policies is critical for fostering stakeholder acceptance and understanding of new directives.

### **Implementation Strategies and Capacity Building**

These are essential for translating policies into actionable outcomes. This stage relies on well-defined action plans that outline specific steps, timelines, and resource allocations. Identifying responsible parties and ensuring stakeholders understand their roles are vital for successful implementation. HEC conducts workshops and training sessions to help university staff effectively understand and implement new policies (Director of Quality Assurance Division). This training is crucial for successful policy adoption and compliance. Moreover, capacity building through training sessions equips educators and administrators with the necessary skills to effectively execute policies. This emphasis on translating policy objectives into tangible results enhances the overall effectiveness of higher education institutions. "Providing training programs for financial staff and administrators to enhance financial management skills. Further, utilizing financial management systems and technologies to streamline processes and improve efficiency" (Deputy Director Finance Division Sindh HEC, 2024). This highlights the importance of developing financial expertise within SHEC and affiliated institutions. By offering training and integrating advanced financial systems, the finance division enhances the ability of staff to manage resources efficiently and adhere to best practices.

### **Local Adaptation and Coordination**

It highlights the role of provincial HECs in adapting and localizing central policies to address region-specific needs. This adaptation process ensures that national strategies remain relevant to the unique challenges faced by provincial educational institutions. Regional consultations with local universities and communities are critical in identifying these needs. Furthermore, coordination between Central and Provincial HECs is essential for aligning national goals with local priorities, thereby creating a coherent approach that respects national standards and regional diversity.

### **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Mechanisms**

It is crucial for tracking policy implementation and assessing its impact. Central and Provincial HECs create frameworks for regular reporting and evaluation, allowing them to identify challenges during implementation. Local monitoring systems provide valuable data on progress and outcomes, while feedback mechanisms facilitate continuous improvement, allowing stakeholders to voice concerns and suggestions for policy refinement. This systematic process fosters a culture of accountability and responsiveness within higher education governance.

The interview reveals: "SHEC monitors the utilization of allocated funds by institutions to ensure compliance with budgetary allocations and financial regulations. The impact of budget allocations on educational outcomes, research productivity, infrastructure development, and student welfare is evaluated periodically" (Deputy Director Finance Division Sindh HEC, 2024).

### **Universities Autonomy**

The governance practices of universities, as shaped by HEC guidelines, provide them with autonomy in designing curricula, developing academic programs, and managing finances. However, this autonomy exists within a framework of HEC regulations that establish national

educational standards and accreditation criteria. While universities are free to innovate, they must comply with these guidelines to ensure quality and integrity in education. This balance promotes fiscal responsibility and institutional sustainability.

While universities enjoy autonomy in decision-making, they must operate within the regulatory framework established by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). This balance between autonomy and compliance is essential for maintaining educational standards. According to the research participants, at the universities in Punjab, governing bodies exercise autonomy within HEC guidelines, which helps tailor decisions to local needs while adhering to national standards: "these decisions are made within the framework established by HEC regulations" (Interview). One of the universities in Punjab highlights the importance of aligning university operations with HEC policies, which ensures quality and accountability: "the autonomy allows the university to tailor its approach to meet local needs and challenges" (Interview).

### **Quality Assurance Guidelines**

Quality assurance guidelines established by HEC significantly influence university governance. These guidelines outline specific criteria for program accreditation, prompting institutions to undergo internal restructuring to align with these standards. This process enhances institutional credibility and fosters continuous improvement in educational quality. Regular curriculum reviews and faculty evaluations maintain high teaching standards and improve student outcomes. All three universities adopted systematic and structured processes to implement HEC quality assurance policies. This involved reviewing HEC guidelines, developing action plans, and conducting training sessions for faculty and staff. For example, one of the universities established a comprehensive implementation plan with clearly defined roles and timelines (interview). The Universities in Sindh created internal guidelines aligned with HEC standards, ensuring faculty and staff were well-informed through regular training sessions (interviews). Such structured approaches not only facilitated the understanding and integration of policies but also ensured a clear roadmap for achieving the goals of higher education policies.

### **Challenges in Governance Practices at Higher Education**

Despite these structured governance practices, several challenges hinder the effectiveness of public sector universities in Pakistan. Political interference significantly affects governance structures, undermining the autonomy necessary for educational excellence. The lack of institutional autonomy and stringent regulations impede universities' decision-making regarding budget allocation and curriculum development. Financial constraints further impact universities' capacity to deliver quality education, as inadequate funding leads to resource shortages and affects teaching quality. Additionally, inconsistent enforcement of quality assurance mechanisms undermines the credibility of degrees awarded while weak accountability structures.

Despite having established governance structures, various challenges hinder universities from fully achieving their educational goals as outlined by HEC. Issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource limitations, and resistance to change are prevalent. Universities in Punjab face bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited financial resources, impacting progress: "bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited financial resources, and occasional misalignment between policy and implementation can impede progress" (Interview). The Universities in Punjab noted that "bureaucratic delays, limited resources, and resistance to change can affect the implementation of reforms" (Interview), highlighting systemic challenges that need addressing.

### **Strategies to Improve Governance Practices**

Several strategies are proposed to enhance governance practices, such as promoting transparency and accountability through clear policies and guidelines, effective leadership and strategic planning, inclusive decision-making processes, capacity building and professional development, and the integration of technology for data-driven decision-making. By implementing these strategies, universities can create a more collaborative governance environment, enhance institutional effectiveness, and better align with educational policy objectives.

The responses suggest several strategies for enhancing governance practices, such as increasing transparency, investing in faculty development, and fostering international partnerships. These changes aim to align university practices with national educational goals better. One of the universities in Punjab recommends enhancing stakeholder engagement and investing in faculty development: "enhancing stakeholder engagement, including input from students and faculty, can foster a more inclusive governance environment" (Interview). Similarly, another university in Punjab advocates for improved transparency and accountability in decision-making processes: "improving transparency and accountability in decision-making processes will help build trust and ensure effective management" (Interview).

In summary, this study's findings underscore the complexity and interconnectivity of governance practices at HECs and HEIs in Punjab and Sindh. By focusing on stakeholder engagement, policy formulation, implementation strategies, local adaptation, and monitoring mechanisms, these institutions can navigate the challenges of higher education governance in Pakistan. Through strategic alignment with national goals and attention to regional needs, the Central and Provincial HECs can significantly improve the educational landscape, ultimately contributing to Pakistan's societal development and human capital growth.

### **Conclusion**

Developing policies and strategies at the Central and Provincial Higher Education Commissions (HECs) in Pakistan is a dynamic process shaped by various interlinked dimensions. This study highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement, localized policy adaptation, and robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks in enhancing the quality and accessibility of higher education. According to Shah et al. (2019), stakeholder engagement is critical for effective governance in higher education, as it fosters a sense of ownership among various parties, including faculty, students, and industry representatives. This engagement enriches the policy development process and ensures that the resulting strategies reflect the needs of the communities they serve.

The study underscores the necessity of a comprehensive needs assessment as a precursor to effective policy formulation. This aligns with the findings of Khan et al. (2020), who argue that understanding local contexts is crucial for the successful implementation of educational policies. By incorporating regional demographics and economic conditions, HECs can tailor their policies to address specific challenges, ensuring a more equitable educational framework. Such a systematic approach is particularly relevant in a country as diverse as Pakistan, where educational needs vary significantly across provinces.

Furthermore, the emphasis on faculty development and capacity building to improve educational quality is noteworthy. Research by Ali et al. (2021) suggests that ongoing professional development for faculty members directly correlates with improved student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. Central and provincial HECs' dual focus on enhancing qualifications at a national level and tailoring programs to local needs demonstrates a commitment to elevating the overall educational landscape in Pakistan.

The study also reveals significant challenges in governance practices within Pakistani public sector universities, notably political interference, lack of autonomy, and financial constraints. Hussain and Rasheed (2022) highlight that political interference undermines academic integrity, leading to appointments prioritizing political affiliation over merit, thus hindering institutional development. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort to depoliticize university governance, allowing for more autonomous decision-making processes. The study advocates for the need to enhance the autonomy of universities, enabling them to make independent decisions regarding resource allocation and curriculum development. This perspective is supported by studies that emphasize the role of institutional autonomy in fostering innovation and improving educational quality (Naqvi et al., 2020).

Moreover, public-sector universities' persistent financial constraints pose a considerable barrier to achieving educational goals. This study's findings echo concerns raised by Shams et al. (2021) regarding the inadequacy of funding, which hampers critical areas such as faculty salaries, infrastructure, and student support services. Exploring alternative funding sources, such as public-private partnerships, may offer a viable solution to alleviate financial pressures on these institutions.

Lastly, the study highlights the importance of establishing robust monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms. Effective quality assurance practices are vital for maintaining educational standards and institutional credibility. This aligns with the findings of Mahmood and Raza (2023), who emphasize the necessity for transparent and accountable governance structures to enhance the integrity of higher education institutions.

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