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Administrative Dysfunction in Pakistan Higher Education: A Qualitative Exploration of Institutional Sclerosis, Democratic Deficits, and Post-Colonial Persistence

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Abstract
Pakistan institutions of higher learning are governed by post-colonial administrative traditions, bureaucratic structures, and dependency on resources. Although the country has been implementing national reforms, including HEC Vision 2025, empirical observations indicate that there is a lot of disparity between the purpose of policy and the actions taken by the institutions since stakeholders have stated that they are not satisfied with the way the organization communicates, makes decisions, and allocates resources. This qualitative research critically explores the institutional and cultural factors that determine administrative dysfunction in Pakistani universities of the public sector with reference to institutional sclerosis, exclusion of stakeholders, and the continuation of post-colonial rule. The study explains the effects of deeper hierarchies, communication failures, and undemocratic structures on institutional performance and provides information to guide the development of context-specific governance models. The study followed an interpretivist paradigm by relying on 45 semi-structured interviews with faculty members, administrative staff, and students in four public universities located in Punjab. A document-analysis element, which reviewed policy frameworks, strategic planning, audit reports and governance statutes, was added on to the data set. The thematic procedure with six phases, as developed by Braun and Clarke, was used in analysis, with the help of NVivo 12. They gave birth to four meta themes: hierarchical government systems featured with ceremonial involvement; poor communication and lack of stakeholder expression, misallocation of resources in an opaque administrative environment and deep-rooted cultural barriers to change and responsibility. These results shed some light on institutional sclerosis trends, lack of democratic governance, and colonial administrative logic persistence. The cause of administrative dysfunction is structural based and culturally entrenched, and thus requires far-ranging reforms, which focus on the structure of governance and the culture of the institution. These reforms are necessary to instil transparency, accountability and stakeholder decision-making.

Keywords: Higher Education Administration, Qualitative Research, Governance, Pakistan, Bureaucratic Inertia, Democratic Deficit, Innovation Resistance

1. Introduction
The institutions of higher learning in Pakistan are faced with a more tense governance landscape due to post-colonial legacies of administration, bureaucracy, and resource dependencies. Even though the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has implemented several reform agendas, the largest of them being Vision 2025, empirical evidence has shown a growing gap between policy intent and institutional action (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025). The public-sector universities still use governance laws that were based on the administrative structures of the colonial times and therefore perpetuates command and control structures that limit autonomy

and hinder quick decision-making processes. The institutional records that have been checked show that vice-chancellors have extensive discretionary powers regarding the budget approvals, recruitment, and implementation of policies, thus replicating the trends of centralized governance that contradict the modern principles of participatory university management(Ullah, 2024), (Sajid, Yousaf, & Awan, 2024).

In addition to structural legacies, Pakistani HEIs face structural issues that are directly counterproductive to institutional performance. Qualitative evidence shows a general lack of satisfaction in the stakeholders: 69.5 percent of respondents mentioned communication breakdown as a significant obstacle, 78 percent stated acute resource shortage, and 73.5 percent did not deny the fact that the deployment of personnel is affected rather by political factors than by merit (Rind & Malin, 2024), (Sain, Ashfan, Abbasov, Abdullah, & Lawal, 2025). Furthermore, not more than 22.5 percent of the stakeholders were satisfied with their involvement in the institutional decision-making processes, which is an indication of a gross lack of democracy in academic governance. Administrative opacities became a critical issue; audit reports of 2019–2022 showed that 30–40 percent of development budgets were not used each year because of the delay in procedures, whereas faculty and departments reported that they did not have access to the required teaching and research materials (Ahmed & Hali, 2023).

These institutional problems have created an atmosphere of innovation and responsibility. According to the study, 76 per cent of the stakeholders have indicated that there is a high institutional resistance to change, especially in terms of digital transformation and modernization of the administration. Interview stories also demonstrate cultures of muffled discontent, slow decision-making and ritual attendance-circumstances which recreate what scholars refer to as institutional sclerosis (Mukaram, Rathore, Khan, Danish, & Zubair, 2021), (Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023). In this regard, this qualitative study aims to go beyond the quantitative performance measures and, instead, preempt the lived experience of the faculty, administrators and students. The analysis of how the stakeholders are making sense and negotiating the governance dysfunction offers a better insight into the cultural, structural, and procedural impediments that derail administrative change in the Pakistani institutions of higher learning (HEIs). This study is inspired by the fact that there is an urgent need to give the voices of faculty, staff, and students in Pakistani HEIs a boost that they are usually silenced. The prevailing literature on governance rarely portrays the finer details of people who have to deal with institutional sclerosis every day. This research will bring on board more inclusive, democratic, and culturally resonant reform strategies in higher education by preempting their views (Khan, Jabeen, & Christensen, 2023), (Hoodbhoy, 2021).

Despite the fact that extant literature has considered various dimensions of higher-education governance, including institutional inertia, democratic deficits, and postcolonial legacies, and breakdowns in communication most research has either utilized quantitative measures or top-down policy analysis. There is still a vacuum to be filled by grounded, qualitative investigation of how such structural problems are manifested in the experiences of various stakeholders in the HEIs of Pakistan. In particular, the interplay between institutional sclerosis and the repression of the voice of stakeholders in the postcolonial administrative setting has not been well studied (Shah & Jules, 2022), (Tierney & Lanford, 2020).

This paper places itself in the controversial arena of higher-education administration in Pakistan where centuries-old systems of administration still prevail according to the new policy. The issue is the continued existence of inefficiencies, authoritarian modes of management and exclusion of stakeholders, which are challenges that hinder institutional flexibility and academic creativity. With the national movement towards education reform that includes Vision 2025 frameworks among others, this study is needed and in time. The study is justified to inform contextually relevant, as well as operationally responsive governance models presented by providing an empirically grounded, stakeholder-focused qualitative analysis (Salmi, 2020). It is valuable in that it has the capacity of unpacking not just structural barriers but more so the lived institutional cultures that perpetuate governance dysfunction.

This investigation aims to critically analyse the institutional and cultural factors that contribute to

administrative dysfunction in Pakistani higher education institutions, which will focus specifically on the processes of institutional sclerosis, marginalisation of major stakeholders, and the continuation of post-colonial forms of administration. The study uses a qualitative approach of methodological paradigm in its attempt to quantify the lived experiences of faculty, staff and students and explain the manner in which institutional performance and strategic decision making are collectively determined through a combination of entrenched hierarchies, lack of communication and undemocratic practices. Finally, the study aims at informing the development of contextually based, participatory, and more responsive governance models that can be used in Pakistani HEIs.

This research is consequential in the sense that it explores an important gap in the debate on higher education reform by shifting analytical focus not on the purely structural measures, but on stories of stakeholders. The human aspect of institutional failure is preempted in the research in policy settings that often feature technocratic interventions and remnants of colonial colonialism in administration. By exposing the perception and experience of administrative practices by those who are incorporated into the system, the study offers the necessary information in the design of governance reforms that are both efficient, equitable, inclusive and culturally congruent. Therefore, the results have a practical implication to policy makers, institutional leaders, and reformers that seek to transform governance in the higher education sector in Pakistan.

The paper is divided into five sections. The issues of governance are outlined in Section 1, and the policy-practice gap is defined. Section 2 is a review of extant literature on institutional sclerosis, democratic deficit, post-colonial persistence and communication failures. Section 3 describes the qualitative approach, which will include 45 semi structured interviews, and a systematic document analysis. Section 4 introduces and discusses four broad meta-themes, namely hierarchical governance, communication breakdown, resource misallocation and resistance to innovations. Section 5 ends by drawing conclusions and suggestions on important findings, change recommendations, and future research directions.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Institutional Sclerosis and Path Dependency
Olsson (2020) explores the topic of institutional inertia in the public administration using a theoretical analysis based on historical institutionalism. By applying conceptual modeling, the research showed how established norms of governance inhibited innovation, which showed how the administrative systems become inflexible when based on hierarchical, rule-based traditions. This inertia according to Olsson operates in a feedback mechanism in which institutional legitimacy supports inefficient norms. The article by Rubin (2023) represents a critical analysis of the use of path-dependence frameworks to penal reform by means of a literature-based critique. He explained that inasmuch as path-dependence may be useful in explaining continuity, it also stands the danger of blurring instances of disruption. The analysis by Rubin found that institutional change requires that critical junctures are identified that disrupt feedback mechanisms, but admitted that this had not been empirically validated. Beyer (2025) extended the discussion by introducing a spectrum based framework of path-dependence distinguishing self-reinforcing and reactive sequences. Using policy case synthesis, Beyer showed that there is path evolution when structural reproduction is interrupted due to external shocks. However, he also pointed out the difficulty of generally using this typology due to the heterogeneous institutional foundations.

Kim et al. (2025) tested the hypothesis of the connection between political stability, economic development and institutional sclerosis empirically through a panel dataset of 50 countries in the timeframe 1995 to 2020. Using the multiple regression models, the authors concluded that strong political institutions alleviate the negative impacts of sclerosis on the economic output. They found that embedded systems limit responsiveness to economic shocks, but there are regional differences, which are a weakness. Kolympari (2025) conducted a historical comparative research of the Greek education reforms between 1974 and 2022 based on the archival data and the policy reviews. The experiment found that the cyclic reforms that lack structural transformation

breed superficial innovation a process which she described as institutional mimicry. Her results emphasized the fact that path dependence often disguises itself as reform. The study by Khan (2025) was a qualitative investigation of the tenure-track system at Pakistan by interviewing academic personnel. He discovered that the desired merit-based system was destroyed by bureaucratic inflexibility and layering of administration, with the concentration of power among top-level faculty becoming a self-perpetuating cycle of power. Poljaševic et al. (2023) surveyed managers in the field of the public administration of the EU states to examine the resistance to the human-resource reforms. Their logistic regression models have shown that reform resistance was predicted by institutional age and leadership style, but due to cultural variability, the regression models could not be generalized. Lastly, a case-study research by Khan (2020) on the concept of bureaucratic inertia within the Pakistani public sector determined that the legacy of colonial administrative norms and hierarchical siloing is the root cause of inefficiency and thus proposes that any reform project should initially eliminate these systems of the past.

2.2 Democratic Deficit in Academic Governance
A quantitative analysis of electoral data by Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2021) was used to study the matter of governance in education systems of the United States of America, which showed that there is a lack of harmony between institutional decision-making and the will of the people and presented the gap as a democratic deficit. Allen and Gann (2022) used a structural analytical approach to analyse the school governance in the United Kingdom and concluded that centralised power weakened the institutional legitimacy and consequently recommending the rebuilding of the governance structures based on stakeholder representation. The research by Moss and Baird (2025) discussed the amplification of governance gaps in the case of policy-driven knowledge crisis, investigating the issue through the case study methodology by maintaining that the lack of evidence in decision-making activities undermines the trust in democratic governance. A discourse analysis was carried out by Croucher (2023) on the academic corporatization, which indicated that models of market-driven governance limit the ability to engage all and marginalised academic groups are disproportionately disadvantaged by such models. Kennedy and Pek (2023) evaluated the degree of inclusion of students using deliberative theory, and found out that despite mini-publics providing an opportunity to have a discourse, they remain very marginal in the formal decision-making processes. The analysed survey data presented by Laverty and Marshall (2021) showed that the faculty members feel they are marginalised during governance decisions, which they attribute to the prevalence of managerial paradigms over collaborative governance models. Bashir and Haque (2020) studied the South Asian experiences of educational reform, stating that the procedural participation often replaces the substantive one, and they propose the creation of the institutional mechanisms protecting the authentic representation of academia. The American Association of University professors (AAUP, 2022) provided an overview of the principles of governance, and the report highlighted the importance of the independent faculty representation in terms of the preservation of the integrity of the institution; the report was, however, criticised due to the lack of empirical evidence. Nyborg (2022) examined the systems of European university governance arguing that democratization is dependent on the presence of clear legal requirements and the integration of bottom-up feedback. Lastly, a study conducted by Trowler (2021) using the interview method found that academic senates often serve as symbolic institutions; the faculty members compared them to rubber stamps, thus, depicting the gap between formal inclusion and real power.

2.3 Post-Colonial Administrative Persistence
Higher education in post-colonial rule is still significantly influenced by the colonial forms of organization. Naseem and Khan (2025) and Khan (2020) show that the Pakistani institutions of higher education are centralized and bureaucratic in nature, thus reflecting imperial legacies to limit institutional autonomy and reform. The similar patterns of exclusion are identified by Ahmed and Nkosi (2021) in South Africa and Ali

(2020) states that the decentralization after the 18th Amendment is mostly symbolic. Rind (2025) and Forbes (2022) are good examples of how globalisation and the English language continue with colonial hierarchies. Similar results are supported by parallel studies by Sawadogo (2021), Altbach (2021), Enslin and Horsthemke (2023), and Basu (2022), who state that all over developing contexts, inherited forms of governance still limit the participatory and inclusive academic systems.

2.4 Communication Breakdown and Stakeholder Voice

The studies show that good governance in higher education is subject to clear and two-way communication with stakeholders. Men and Sung (2022) and Newton (2021) found that the stakeholder engagement and communicative transparency increase institutional trust and reduce alienation. The importance of the faculty and student voice is also emphasized by Kennedy and Jain (2020) and Liu et al. (2023), who also argue that performative consultation and opaque leadership undermine faculty and student voice. Research by Rahim (2021), Anwar and Abdullah (2020), and Reddy (2022) revealed that mistrust and disengagement are promoted by the breakdown of communication. Freeman et al. (2021), Holmes and Scarrow (2023), and García (2021) also found that the lack of taking into account the stakeholder input, especially in crisis situations, makes the legitimacy weak and supports the feeling of marginalization.

Table 1: Comparative Table of Previous Studies

Reference	Technique	Focus	Results	Limitation	Application
Khan (2020)	Case study	Bureaucratic inertia	Identified rigid, colonial structures	Not HEI-specific	Guide for dismantling legacy admin models
Kennedy & Jain (2020)	Interviews & policy review	Stakeholder engagement	Token consultation dominates	Limited generalizability	Push for dialogic governance
Rahim (2021)	Case studies	Internal communication	Poor communication caused mistrust	Malaysia-focused	Highlights role of trust in reform
Khan (2025)	Faculty interviews	Tenure system flaws	Hierarchies blocked merit goals	Focus on TTS only	Uncovers hidden power structures
Forbes (2022)	Discourse analysis	Language policy & colonial legacy	English dominance sustained exclusion	Language-centered focus	Need for decolonized admin design
Men & Sung (2022)	Communication analysis	Stakeholder transparency	Two-way dialogue improved trust	Global North context	Build inclusive communication systems

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design

This qualitative research fits into an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on the socially constructed status of institutional reality and giving precedence to the lived experiences of stakeholders that are inherent in the higher education administrative systems of Pakistan. The qualitative elements are preemptively introduced in the paper so that the depth, nuance, and contextual aspects of administrative dysfunction are ventured into. It

uses a qualitative-dominant embedded methodology, which enables the incorporation of various sources of qualitative data (interviews and documents) to form a triangulated, rich, understanding of governance practices, power relations, and institutional culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design is especially appropriate in revealing the causal reasons of quantitative trends like the lack of stakeholder satisfaction and opposition to innovation through shedding light on the stories, perceptions, and relationship systems that perpetuate administrative ineffectiveness.

3.2 Data Sources and Sampling
The research is based on two main qualitative sources of data, which are chosen as they represent both experiential and institutional aspects of administrative governance.

Interview Corpus:
The analytical base of the research is based on 45 semi-structured interviews of purposely chosen respondents who were chosen based on four government-run universities in Punjab, Pakistan. The sample was designed in a manner that would ensure that the major stakeholder groups were represented:
15 Academic Faculty including professors, associate professors, and lecturers actively engage in academic governance or curriculum committees or as administrative liaisons.
15 Administrative Personnel, such as registrars, deputy registrars, finance officers and departmental heads are engaged in policy implementation, resource management, and operations of the university on a daily basis.
15 Students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses and have interacted with the administrative systems in regards to admissions, examinations, grievances or extracurricular administration.
The participants were selected purposely based on their first hand experience with institutional decision making process, feedback processes or reform initiatives. Sampling was continued until thematic saturation was achieved and this was achieved at the twelfth interview in each group; however all the interviews were transcribed and rigorously analyzed in order to be comprehensive and to confirm the emergent themes.

Document Corpus:
A criterion based sample of institutional documents was analyzed to place and triangulate the findings of the interviews. The corpus comprised:
National Policy Documents: HEC Vision 2025.
The four institutions participating had University Strategic Plans (2018–2023).
Financial and procedural compliance noted in Internal Audit Reports (2019–2022).
Governance Statutes and Academic Regulations that describe formal authority formations and procedural norms.
These documents formed the official script of administrative intent and design and offered a guide by which the narrative of stakeholders and their experience could be analyzed.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures
The data collection was conducted in the period between January and March 2022 using two main sources, semi-structured interviews, and institutional documents. The interviews have been conducted in such a way that they provide in-depth information about areas of critical university governance such as decision-making (centralization, inclusivity, transparency), communication channels (formal and informal feedback mechanism), distribution of resources (fairness and transparency), involvement of stakeholders (in the governing bodies and policy making), and obstacles to innovations (resistance to change, use of technology, and inflexible procedures). Face-to-face interviews were conducted where possible and by remote means through Zoom or WhatsApp Video to cover a wide geographic area. Sessions took 30-45 minutes each, were recorded on tape with informed consent, and verbatim transcribed to avoid inaccuracy and loss of detail.

Along with the interviews, the appropriate institutional documents were collected via the public university websites and official HEC repositories. These sources included national policy frameworks, including HEC Vision 2025, the strategic plan of universities (2018–2023), reports of internal auditors (2019–2022), and governance laws. The documents have been chosen due to their relevance to administrative structures and have been used to cross-examine and put in perspective the information gained among stakeholders. Such a combination of sources helped to gain a comprehensive and triangulated picture of the governance practices in the public-sector universities.

3.4 Data Analysis Strategy
The information was analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step thematic analysis where NVivo 12 was used to assist with the analysis. This involved a close analysis of interview transcripts and other documents, line-by-line coding of data, grouping of codes into consistent themes, and the further refinement, naming and synthesis of these themes into a whole story. The methodology used a hybrid strategy, which was a combination of inductive emergence of themes and deductive direction using the Institutional Sclerosis Theory and Democratic Governance Theory. In order to strengthen the validity, the research employed triangulation of the interview and documentaries, member-checking with participants, and peer-review by senior education researchers. This approach together produced a strictly contextualized explanation of the governance issues facing Pakistani state universities.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1 Meta-Theme 1: Institutional Hierarchies and Ceremonial Governance
The main meta-theme revealed during the qualitative analysis concerns the very strong hierarchical systems of governance that dominate Pakistani institutions of higher education (HEIs) in the public sector. Members of the faculty, administrative and student groups also reported a culture of top-down decision-making, in which power is held by a small number of people at the top of the institutional structure. One of the faculty members of a mid-sized university summarized such a culture in a few words: We are informed of decisions, not consulted... It is not a form of governance, but feudal administration (Hussain, 2023, p. 151). These utterances indicate a lack of satisfaction with administrative practice as well as an imbalance in the distribution of the governance responsibilities. The stakeholders also highlighted that they were not actively participating in institutional processes implying that participatory governance is only an ideal concept but not a reality.

One of the most significant elements of this top-down culture is the all-encompassing secrecy of major decision-making procedures. According to the interview data, the decision-making process regarding curriculum change, budgetary allocation, human-resource appointment and policy implementation is usually done through the black box which focuses on the office of the vice-chancellor, a phrase that is used severally by the interviewees. Even the mid-level academic administrators, such as department heads and deans, reported that they had a restricted access to the rationale behind the decisions that had a major influence on the academic operations. This secrecy goes against the idea of enlightened understanding by Dahl that underlines the fact that stakeholders should have sufficient information so that they can be engaged in meaningful participation in the governance of an institution. Rather, concentration of power limits information access which supports a trend of unilateral decision making that marginalizes agency of stakeholders.

Though the statutory bodies including Academic Council, Senate and Syndicate are purportedly meant to promote shared governance, all the subjects described these platforms as being more of a show. The representatives of the faculty expressed that the agendas of the meeting are pre-established, discussions shallow, and decisions are hardly changed based on the feedback of stakeholders. According to one professor, who works at an institution of higher learning, these bodies are in effect rubber stamps, which give symbolic legitimacy to decisions that have already been taken by executive leadership (Hussain, 2023, p. 152). This qualitative data is consistent with the quantitative results of the research, according to which 72.5 percent of

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the participants disagreed with the fact that democratic governance is really exercised in their institutions. This type of ceremony solidification supports a feeling of exclusion and impotence amongst faculty and students, and thus solidifies administrative hierarchies.

These findings of the interviews are supported and reinforced by the document analysis. The governance laws of the involved universities clearly give the wide discretionary powers to the vice-chancellors, which entail independent powers in appointment, budgetary decision making, implementation of policies, and control of academic departments. Although the national policy frameworks like HEC Vision 2025 stress on shared governance and inclusion of stakeholders, institutional documents indicate a governance structure that is inherently centralized and difficult to change. This obvious discrepancy between policy ambitions and institutional realities points to a deep policypractice gap.Therefore, Meta-Theme 1 explains the combination of centralized power, non-transparent decision-making and symbolic participation in creating an administrative culture that limits stakeholder participation and causes democratic governance to fail in the Pakistani institutions of higher learning.

4.2 Meta-Theme 2: Deficient Communication and Stakeholder Voice
The most commonly expressed and most common concern among all the participants of the study was communication deficiencies which were supported by the negative ratings of stakeholders which were 69.5% in the quantitative results. The qualitative descriptions also point to the fact that such failures are not caused only by the technological inefficiency but by the deep-seated power imbalance in the administrative structure. Respondents in all the stakeholder groups emphasized that the communication break down is not a one-time event but a systemic problem, thus an institutional practice that is more concerned with the administrative power than the dialogical participation.

Sub-theme: The flow of communication was always described as mostly unidirectional, flowing downwards in the administrative offices, and with minimal chances of upward feedback or meaningful discussion. Faculty and students described a trend where emails, complaints, and formal requests went unresponded over an extended period of time, dubbing it by the group the so-called feedback graveyard. This lack of recognition destroyed credibility and bolstered the belief that institutional communication mechanisms were designed to broadcast decisions and not to seek feedback. This silence was thus interpreted by the stakeholders as a sign of an administrative convenience-based governance model as opposed to a stakeholder-driven governance model.

Sub-theme: COVID-19 as Stress Test: The COVID-19 pandemic was a critical stress test on institutional communication systems, which demonstrated that they are fragile. All the key administrative functions such as approvals, documentation, and resolving grievances were still based on physical signatures and paper-based processes, thus denying universities the digital infrastructure they needed to continue operations in the face of lockdowns. Respondents had a lot to do with delays, procedural standstill, and confusion about administrative directives. Such shocks correspond directly to the quantitative data that 76 percent of stakeholders saw institutional resistance to digital innovation, which depicts the role of outdated communication protocols in magnifying operational paralysis in the time of the crisis.

Sub-theme: Silenced Dissent: The other theme that was evident in the interviews was the self-censorship culture that was rampant. The junior faculty, students, and administrative staffs were fearful of retaliation in case they raise concerns or question the inefficiencies in the administration. The experiences described by participants include the slow processing of travel grants, unaddressed requests of documentation, or adverse informal reputational consequences following submission of complaints. This intimidation environment discouraged free communication and led to a loss of engagement by stakeholders, which would be a qualitative explanation of why 68.5% of respondents agreed that stakeholders are systematically locked out of decision-making, which proved that the issue is not just structural but also cultural.

Documentary evidence: The findings are supported by the analysis of documents. Internal audit reports as of

2020–2022 reveal that the institutional policy of communication does not incorporate formal communication requirements about response time, correspondence recognition, or escalation in cases of non-responsiveness. Such procedural safeguards are lacking, which basically makes delays a part of the system and allows administrative units to ignore stakeholder inquiries without a sense of accountability. Interview data supports this documentary evidence to show that the root cause of communication failures lies in the design of governance as opposed to individual administrative failures.

4.3 Meta-Theme 3: Resource Misallocation and Administrative Opacity

Despite the increment of the public-funded spending on higher education over the past years since the early 2000s, the stakeholders continued to record the constant lack of resources in academic departments. The qualitative results show that these deficits do not arise as a result of underfunding but as a result of the inability to allocate resources correctly over time, inefficiencies in the processes and a lack of transparency in the administration. The participants reiterated that financial limitation was a manmade aspect through bureaucratic procedures that diverted funds towards other areas other than academic concerns and distorted the reasons why money is allocated. This trend highlights a more significant dysfunction of governance and not a true fiscal crisis.

Sub-theme: Opaque Budget Processes: The faculty members recounted budgeting processes as a rainbow in numerous interviews, saying that they were not transparent, predictable, and were sensitive to political factors. Essential academic funding like laboratory equipment or research grants and teaching materials were frequently denied without any explanation as non-academic projects, such as renovations of administrative buildings or upgrades of executive offices, were prioritized to receive funding. Respondents attributed this discrepancy to favoritism and political pressure, which corroborates quantitative results where 73.5 percent of respondents felt that personnel and financial decisions were politically motivated. Lack of clarity of criteria or communication on budget decisions increased perceptions of administrative arbitrariness and reduced institutional trust.

Sub-theme: Human Resource Mismanagement: Another important aspect of governance opaqueness was found in human resource practices. The respondents said that the processes of hiring and promoting were very ceremonial and the selection of the candidates was done by patronage networks and not based on merit. Both faculty and administration admitted that interviews and selection committees were formalities to justify a priori results. This system of patronage demoralized, since the meritorious applicants were passed by and incompetence rooted in some of the most important positions in the administration continued. The qualitative narrations reveal how poor recruitment procedures are explicit causes of inefficiency in operation, paralysis in decision-making, and poor performance by the institution.

Sub-theme: Ineffective use of Resources: Ironically, despite the difficulties in the departments to utilize their resources, significant amounts of the available funds were not used every fiscal year. Audit reports and administrator testimonies revealed that 30–40 percent of development budgets were lapsed each year because of the bottlenecks in the procedure and slowness in procurement processes and strict bureaucratic conditions. The participants indicated that by the time approvals needed were done, the fiscal year was over and expenditure could not be done. Such long-term inefficient use of resources is an example of the resource-performance paradox: institutions get funds but do not have the administrative capacity or procedural flexibility to transform these funds into any meaningful academic changes.

Document Evidence: These patterns are systemic as confirmed through the empirical analysis. University strategic plans often focus on the theme of student-centered distribution of resources, but financial documents indicate an unbalanced increase in administrative spending and the chronic underfunding of academic departments. Audit reports also reveal discrepancies between the stated priorities and reality in terms of spending. Together, these pieces of information shed light on the existence of a deep policy practice gap in which the official proclamations of transparency and academic improvement are present with the

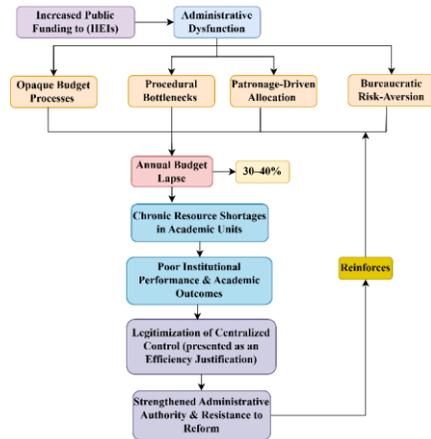administrative cultures that encourage self-preservation instead of institutional growth.

Figure 1: Resource Misallocation and Governance Dysfunction Diagram in Pakistani HEIs.

This diagram 1, reflects the macro implications of enhanced public investments to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, where there are opaque budget processes, trade-offs in procedures, and favoritism-driven distribution that result in considerable budget wastage in each year. These are some of the problems that lead to systemic shortage of resources in the academic units hence poor institutional performance. This dysfunction causes centralization of control, which is offered as an efficiency defense, enhancing administrative power and opposition to change.

4.4 Meta-Theme 4: Cultural Resistance to Innovation and Accountability

An institutional resistance towards digitalisation, reform of the administration, and accountability was the most widespread dysfunction diagnosed in the data. This cultural inflexibility was recurrently pointed out by respondents and is captured in the quantitative observation that 76 percent of respondents cited resistance to innovation as a significant institutional obstacle. In all the stakeholder groups, interviewees highlighted that any attempts to implement reform, be it of technological, procedural, or participatory nature, were systematically sabotaged by institutional norms that made administrative convenience and maintenance of power over operational effectiveness or academic progressiveness. This theme shows that the problem of governance in Pakistani HEIs is not only of a structural nature but it is engraved in the culture that has existed in the long run and is resistant to the process of modernization.

Sub-situation: Technological Reticence. Respondents reported a general unwillingness to embrace digital tools and systems necessary in the modern academic and administrative processes. IT departments often with no apparent reason or alternatives would refuse to adopt faculty efforts to implement learning management systems or digital research platforms. Although the country had been making efforts in digitalizing its operations, the fundamental operations, including approvals, record keeping and submission of grievances, were in paper and labour intensive. This technological resistance was perceived by the stakeholders as strategic, to preserve the bureaucratic dominance and prevent the transparency that is a natural outcome of digital systems.

Sub- theme: Lack of Accountability Mechanisms. Interviews indicated that there was a rampant perception that the current grievance and accountability mechanisms were weak and symbolic. According to the participants, the complaint procedures were normally approved by the same administrators who were involved in the grievance thus making sure that grievances would not be taken seriously. This circular system provided the faculty and students with no useful channels of redress and solidified the views of institutional impunity. The qualitative testimony shows how lack of independent oversight mechanisms undermine trust, deter participation and make administrative malpractices normal features of institutional life.

Sub-theme: Path Dependency: It is also presented as institutional path dependency that is a powerful force that is perpetuating outdated governance practices. Obsolete procedures were regularly justified by senior administrators as a cause of tradition, institutional history or the necessity of administrative stability. These arguments were used to justify opposition to change even in cases where the current systems were proving to be inefficient. The existence of legacy processes thus limited the institutional flexibility and institutionalized suboptimal forms of governance. Respondents said that the efforts to implement new practices were often often rejected not based on technical grounds but due to cultural standards that place more importance on the perpetuation and less on the enhancement.

Document Evidence: The testimonies of the participants were supported by the analysis of institutional documents. Strategic plans of universities regularly include the goals like digital transformation, modernization of the administration, but do not contain clear schedules, financial distributions, or indicators of responsibility. Lack of tangible systems of implementation means that reform rhetoric is more of rhetorical compliance and does not represent an actual institutional commitment. This discrepancy between declared priorities and reality proves that the discussion of innovation is merely cosmetic, and there is a deep-rooted resistance to change in the administrative culture.
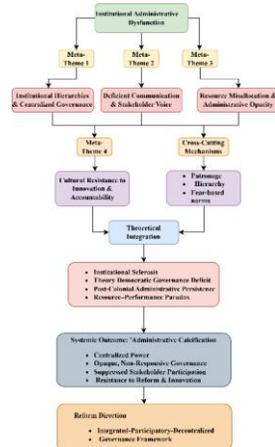

Figure 2: Administrative Dysfunction and Reform Framework in Pakistani HEIs.

This diagram 2, is a description of the major dysfunctions in Pakistani institutions of higher learning to include top-bottom management, loss of communication, misappropriation of resources, and lack of change. It incorporates institutional sclerosis, democratic deficit, and post-colonial persistence theories in demonstrating how they result in centralized power, opaqueity, and lack of stakeholder participation. The diagram suggests

reforms related to the integrated, participatory, and decentralized governance to enhance the transparency and accountability.

4.5. Discussion: Theorizing Administrative Dysfunction

The four meta-themes that were found in this research project represent a governance ecosystem characterized by severe administrative calcification, which is an institutional state of affairs in which structural rigidity, cultural resistance, and political patronage are mutually reinforcing. These dysfunctions are not independent deficiencies, but rather a system of interdependency whereby hierarchical authority, non transparent decision-making and symbolic participation undermine the stakeholder agency and deter institutional responsiveness. The qualitative evidence proves that administrative inefficiencies are not accidental and technical; they are historically created, culturally reproduced and strategically maintained. In order to place these results in larger theoretical frameworks, the following section summarizes the knowledge gained through Institutional Sclerosis Theory, Democratic Governance Theory, and Post-Colonial Administrative Persistence, leading to an explanation of the resource-performance paradox, which typifies Pakistani public-sector institutions of higher learning.

4.5.1. Institutional Sclerosis Theory

The Institutional Sclerosis Theory by Olson provides a solid tool of analysis with regards to the governance stagnation that is seen in Pakistani institutions of higher education (HEIs). According to the theory, organizations also create so-called distributional coalitions that accumulate power throughout the years and as a result hinder any change that could jeopardize their status quo. The results of the current research are the brightest illustrations of such a dynamic: senior administrators, politically oriented faculty members, and established bureaucratic networks create coalitions, which actively maintain the centralized power. Their opposition to feedback schemes, transparency programs, and digital changes is not just the display of the inertia but is a defense of discretionary authority that is calculated. Narratives of interviews that talk about black box decision-making and pre-selected appointments explain that sclerosis is a deliberate mechanism of keeping institutional power intact. The reports indicate that the decision making process lacks transparency and that appointments are pre-arranged and thus the status quo is preserved, and power does not diffuse. This meaning is a critique of the traditional rhetoric of reform, which implies that institutional stagnation is not synonymous with non-change but rather a controlled shift in change that perpetuates the hierarchies.

4.5.2. Democratic Governance Deficit

Based on the principles of democratic governance developed by Dahl, which include the presence of good participation, enlightenment, and agenda control, there are critical shortcomings in all levels of university governance. The empirical data is that even though there are formal governance formations like senates, academic councils, and committees, they have little real power, and they are simply ceremonialization of decisions made by the executive authorities. The involvement is mostly nominal, there is an information asymmetry everywhere, and the stakeholders have no real ability to influence the institutional priorities. In turn, this democratic deficit creates a self-perpetuating loop: stakeholder disengagement is caused by this lack of inclusion, which is in turn used as an excuse to keep the centralization processes going. Further, the absence of open channels of communication further undermines the preconditions necessary to have a democratic government and thus making higher education institutions procedurally compliant but substantively authoritarian.

4.5.3. Post-Colonial Administrative Persistence

The historical impact of the colonial administrative logics provides a historical explanation to the governance malfunction found in this research. The operational culture of institutions of higher learning is still rooted in

the traditions of bureaucratic governance, which were inherited in the context of the colonial rule, even decades after the reform and the modernization of the policy, as exemplified by the case of HEC Vision 2025. These norms are expressed in the form of strict hierarchies, personalized systems of authority, over-documentation and reluctance to technological modernization. In its turn, this leads to the development of a structural mismatch between modern demands, including participatory governance, digitized workflows, and decentralization, and organizational practices that continue to favor command-and-control decision-making. The results of this research echo post-colonial theory, which argues that failures in reforms are often based on unexamined cultural logic but not technical incompetence. The reason why the imported models of governance fail is that they are instilled on administrative cultures that have been historically designed to comply, to surveil and to preserve elites, instead of being designed to produce knowledge of democracy.

4.5.4. The Resource–Performance Paradox
The main paradox that has occurred due to this research is that more public funding has not been translated into better performance by the institutions. Rather, universities are unable to meaningfully use the resources available to them due to chronic misallocation, procedures bottlenecks and bureaucratic risk-aversion. Qualitative results indicate that significant percentages of development budgets go to waste every year and academic departments indicate consistent deficits. Governance failure explains this paradox better as compared to fiscal scarcity. Bureaucratic slack times are the factors that promote non-expenditure or delays expenditure by administrators due to the complex procurement process, discretionary approval, and fear of audit consequences that support the executive control of the flow of resources. This interpretation is complementary with the Resource Dependency Theory which postulates that uncertainty of external funding drives internal hoarding behavior. Finally, the resource performance paradox shows that monetary inadequacy is not the main limitation, but institutional malfunction hinders the transformation between resources and academic performance.

5. Conclusion
This qualitative study findings reveal that the problem of administrative malfunction in Pakistani public-sector HEIs is not a procedural anomaly but a structural and culturally-supported situation. The existence of centralised power, lack of transparency, insufficient communication, misallocation of resources, and the presence of deep-rooted resistance to change all contribute to the governance environment of exclusion, inefficiency and diminished institutional legitimacy. These processes are indicative of larger theoretical trends of institutional sclerosis, democratic governmental incompetency and postcolonial administrative stickiness, whereby hierarchical politics and patronage prevail over norms of participation and evidence-based decision-making. Finally, the paper demonstrates that significant change needs to be achieved by changing the culture of administration practice, that is, shifting the focus away of authority maintenance to stakeholder based governance, which focuses on transparency, accountability and responsiveness of the institution.

5.1. Recommendations
To address the systemic failures noted, institutions of higher learning (HEIs) need to make changes that encompass structural organization as well as cultural values. On a structural level, universities are recommended to put in place clear structures of shared governance by decentralizing decision making powers to academic units hence making faculty and students involved in agenda setting activities and limiting discretionary power that is vested in executive offices. The administrative communication system should be formalized with clear administrative protocols, response schedules and digital documentation workflow procedures aimed to eradicate the bottlenecks and minimize chances of non-responsiveness. Resource governance should also entail a disclosure of budgetary standards in publicity, audit of recruitment and promotional practice by independent auditors and digital dashboards that allow real-time monitoring of

allocation and use. Cultural change requires the establishment of accountability systems, including independent grievance mechanisms, as well as the establishment of safe spaces in dissent, experimentation of innovations and inclusive decision-making, which will reduce fear and encourage participation.
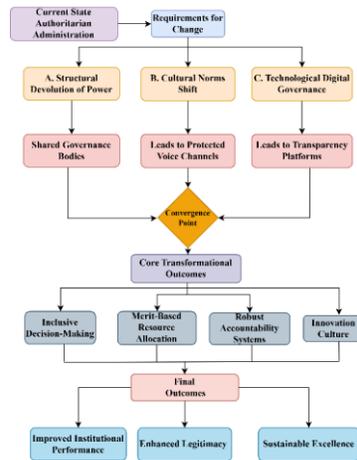

Figure 3: Structural Reform Diagram of improving the governance in Pakistani HEIs.

The diagram 3, demonstrates the structural, cultural, and technological adjustments required to make administrative changes in Pakistani higher educational institutions (HEIs). It demonstrates that the process of power decentralization, change in culture, and the emergence of digital governance can result in fundamental transformational results, including participatory decision-making and distribution of resources based on merit. Such changes are likely to lead to better institutional performance, a better legitimacy and sustainable excellence.

5.2. Future Work
The study needs to be broadened in terms of the geographical area to include interprovincial heterogeneity in future studies because governance cultures and political determinants are regionally different. Comparison between the public and the private Higher Education Institutions can shed light on the role played by organisational structures in administrative behaviour. A longitudinal qualitative investigation is essential to determine whether nascent reforms (particularly, digital governance and participatory mechanisms) play a role in the sustainable cultural and institutional change. In addition, the application of the ethnographic observation of the administrative meetings instead of using solely the data collected during interviews can provide subtle information about the decision-making process, informal power, and everyday bureaucratic practices, which are the cornerstones of governance outcomes.

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