

THE CRISIS OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN A CONTRADICTORY GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEM: INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Higher education institutions in Pakistan, particularly public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), are currently experiencing a profound crisis of governance, financial sustainability, and academic quality. This paper examines the evolving role of academic leadership within a contradictory governance ecosystem shaped by neoliberal policy reforms and entrenched bureaucratic traditions. Over the past two decades, donor-driven structural adjustment programs, most notably those associated with international financial institutions, have promoted a transition from a Weberian bureaucratic model of governance to New Public Management (NPM). These reforms have emphasized privatization, quantification of performance, and market-oriented management practices, while largely ignoring the public-good character of higher education in Pakistan's socio-political context. This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in reflective practitioner scholarship. Drawing on seven purposively selected in-depth interviews with senior academic leaders, the author's twenty-five years of professional experience in Pakistan's public higher education sector, semi-structured conversations with leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and analysis of policy and regulatory documents, the study seeks analytical depth rather than statistical generalization, consistent with qualitative governance research (Flyvbjerg, 2006), this study argues that academic leadership has been increasingly reduced to managerial compliance rather than visionary, transformative leadership. University leaders are compelled to act as knowledge workers and administrators focused on metrics, revenue generation, and procedural accountability, rather than as intellectual leaders capable of articulating institutional vision, defending academic autonomy, and responding to local societal needs. This tension between neoliberal governance demands and the traditional public, welfare-oriented role of universities has produced what this paper conceptualizes as a crisis of academic leadership. The findings highlight how unrealistic policy expectations, financial dependency on external donors, and weak alignment between state structures and university governance frameworks undermine leadership agency and institutional resilience. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for contextually grounded leadership models that reconcile global governance pressures with local realities, reaffirm higher education as a

public good, and reposition academic leaders as agents of empowerment rather than instruments of neoliberal compliance.

INTRODUCTION

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) currently hosts forty universities, comprising eight private and thirty-two public sector institutions administered by the Higher Education Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in coordination with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. While private universities in the province have largely maintained financial stability through market-based funding and tuition-driven models, public sector universities increasingly exhibit the defining characteristics of a structural and persistent organizational crisis. These include governance instability, chronic financial stress, politicization of leadership appointments, regulatory overreach, declining academic morale, and erosion of institutional autonomy. Together, these conditions constrain academic performance, weaken organizational effectiveness, and undermine the public mission of universities. Drawing on organizational crisis scholarship, these conditions correspond closely to what has been described as the incubation phase of crisis, in which early warning signals are present but are normalized, ignored, or inadequately addressed (Fink, 1986; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Mitroff, 2004). In KP's public universities, such warning signals are evident in delayed decision-making, weakening collegial trust, faculty disengagement, recurrent disputes over governance authority, and the contested legitimacy of academic leadership. Rather than being episodic disruptions, crises in these institutions have become structural and cyclical, recurring with increasing frequency and intensity. When unresolved tensions reach critical thresholds, universities enter an acute phase of crisis marked by abrupt administrative interventions, leadership turnover, budgetary freezes, regulatory inquiries, and public controversies. During these periods, decision-making is constrained by time pressure, fragmented information flows, and intense political and media scrutiny (Boin & Smith, 2006; Hannah et al., 2009). Crisis research consistently shows that such moments

significantly reshape leader-follower relationships, as faculty and staff become simultaneously more dependent on and more skeptical of institutional leadership (Halverson et al., 2004). In KP, this dynamic is further complicated by the dual accountability of vice chancellors who are answerable primarily to political authorities and regulatory bodies rather than academic communities, thereby weakening collegial governance precisely when it is most needed (Scott et al., 2008).

This paper:

The paper draws on a qualitative, interpretive research design informed by reflective practitioner scholarship. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in governance and leadership, including senior academic administrators such as Vice Chancellors and Registrars. Participants were selected purposively because of their expertise, institutional roles, and leadership experience within higher education. In addition, the author's twenty-five years of professional engagement as a faculty member, researcher, and academic leader within Pakistan's public higher education system serve as a significant analytical resource. This positionality provides privileged insight into governance processes and leadership challenges that are often inaccessible to external observers. These practitioner reflections are further enriched through semi-structured conversations with academic leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, alongside a systematic analysis of relevant policy documents and regulatory frameworks. The study prioritizes analytical depth over statistical generalization, aligning with established principles of qualitative governance research (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

This paper argues that the crisis confronting public sector universities in KP is structural rather than technical. At its core lies a transformation of academic leadership produced by a contradictory governance ecosystem, in

which centralized bureaucratic control coexists uneasily with market-oriented and performance-driven expectations inspired by New Public Management (NPM). Under this configuration, academic leaders are increasingly repositioned as compliance-oriented managers responsible for meeting externally imposed targets, rather than as intellectual stewards capable of articulating institutional vision, defending academic autonomy, and responding to local social needs. This contradiction produces leadership paralysis, undermines institutional resilience, and exposes universities to recurring crises. By integrating organizational crisis theory, crisis leadership scholarship, and higher education governance literature, this paper advances the central claim that the crisis of Pakistan's public universities particularly in KP should be understood as a crisis of academic leadership embedded within a misaligned governance structure. Rather than attributing institutional decline to individual leadership failure, the study foregrounds the systemic conditions that disempower leaders, constrain agency, and erode the capacity for institutional learning and adaptation.

Why Leadership Matters in the rise & fall of an organization?

The contrasting trajectories of higher education institutions in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, demonstrate that institutional resilience and academic excellence are fundamentally leadership-driven and time-dependent, rather than merely functions of financial resources or infrastructure. Institutions that have achieved national and international credibility have typically done so through sustained, visionary, and ethically grounded leadership, while those experiencing chronic instability are characterized by frequent leadership turnover, politicized appointments, and weak governance continuity. From the late twentieth century onward, the leadership of Prince Karim Aga Khan offers a compelling illustration of how long-term, values-based institutional stewardship can produce globally competitive educational institutions in developing contexts. Through the Aga Khan

Development Network, sustained investment in higher education since the 1960s, embedded academic quality within a broader framework of human development, ethical governance, and social responsibility, demonstrating that excellence can be achieved even under conditions of economic and political constraint (AKDN, 2015; Marginson, 2016). Crucially, this success was not the product of isolated initiatives but of consistent leadership engagement over decades, linking institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and societal relevance.

A parallel national example is provided by Syed Babar Ali's leadership in establishing the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in 1984 and guiding its strategic development over subsequent decades. By institutionalizing meritocracy, academic freedom, international benchmarking, and professional governance, LUMS emerged as Pakistan's leading private university and a reference point for higher education reform (Clark, 1998; HEC, 2017). These features identified by the Higher Education Commission itself as prerequisites for sustainable excellence were not incidental outcomes, but the result of deliberate leadership choices sustained over time.

In contrast, many public sector universities in KP exhibit patterns of governance instability, leadership discontinuity, and politicized decision-making, which have contributed to declining academic performance and recurrent organizational crises (HEC, 2019). Leadership tenures are often short, institutional priorities shift with political cycles, and vice chancellors operate under constrained autonomy, limiting their capacity to implement long-term academic strategies. These conditions undermine institutional memory, weaken faculty trust, and discourage innovation. However, the experience of selecting public institutions in KP demonstrates that leadership can still matter decisively under adverse structural conditions. Faisal Bari (Dean, School of Education, LUMS) argues that selection and appointment processes in Pakistan often mistake managerial or administrative seniority for leadership. As he writes, "For a school to work, a 'leader' must be

there. ... Being senior or being more educated is no guarantee that a person is a good leader too or even has the potential to be one.” (Bari, 2023). This suggests that administrative rank, managerial skill or seniority though important, are not identical with the capacity for transformational academic leadership, and that appointment procedures should be reformed to assess leadership potential explicitly rather than relying primarily on status or tenure.

The selection criteria employed by the Higher Education Department (HED) for appointing Vice Chancellors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were initially framed as objective and merit-based, relying on measurable indicators such as academic qualifications, research publications, administrative experience, and seniority (Higher Education Commission, 2017). While ostensibly neutral, these technocratic criteria proved inadequate to insulate the process from political interference. Over time, VC appointments increasingly became arenas of political negotiation and informal patronage, where formal eligibility functioned merely as a procedural filter rather than a determinant of leadership suitability (Farukh & Aziz-ur-Rehman, 2024). This politicisation reflects a deeper governance failure in which managerial and bureaucratic credentials are privileged over academic leadership capacity, vision, and institutional stewardship (Khan & Jabeen, 2019). As argued by Faisal Bari, seniority and administrative experience do not necessarily translate into effective leadership in higher education, particularly in contexts where governance structures reward compliance over vision (Bari, 2023).

The leadership of the late Dr. Hidayatullah Khan at the Institute of Management Sciences (IMSciences) between 1995 and 2003 illustrates how foundational leadership during formative periods can insulate public institutions from systemic weaknesses. By prioritizing professional governance structures, faculty development, and curriculum relevance, IMSciences established a durable institutional trajectory that later enabled it to emerge as one of Pakistan’s leading public-sector management schools. Similarly, Abdul Ali

Khan’s sustained academic leadership across the University of Peshawar and Gomal University during the 1970s and 1980s, combined with his role as Education Secretary of the former NWFP, exemplified a form of academic statesmanship that strengthened institutional discipline, administrative coherence, and system-level capacity. Collectively, these cases demonstrate that the crisis of public universities in KP is not inevitable. Rather, it reflects deficits in long-term, visionary, and institutionally embedded leadership, compounded by governance arrangements that prioritize compliance over stewardship. Institutions that benefited from stable, ethical, and strategically committed leadership over time were able to evolve into nationally and internationally respected centers of excellence, even within constrained political and economic environments.

Theorizing Crisis, Leadership, and Governance

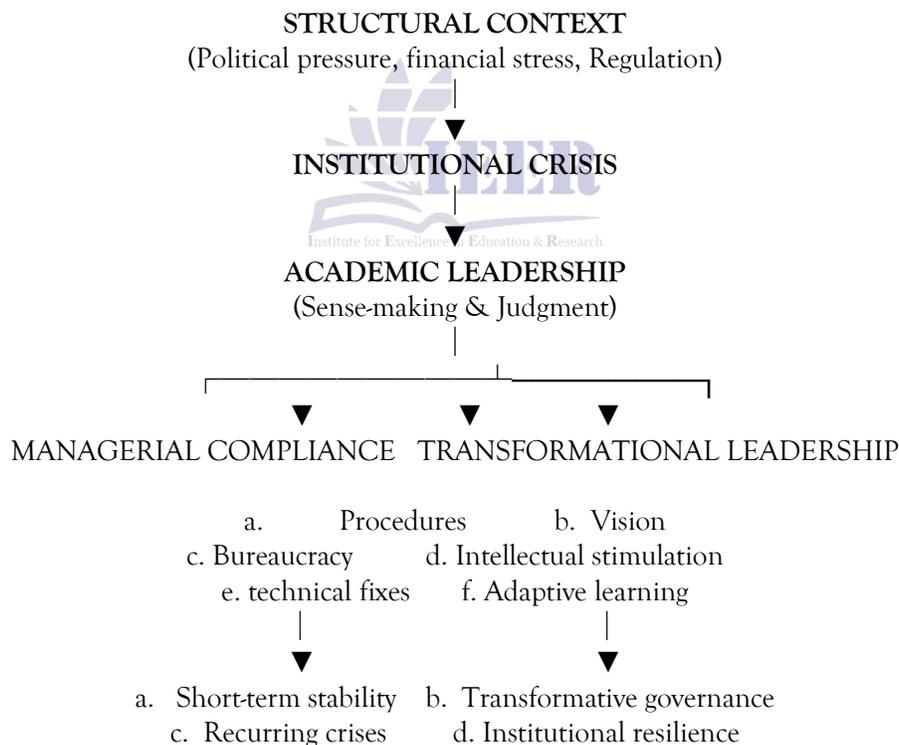
This study conceptualizes academic leadership as a relational and contextually embedded practice situated at the intersection of collegial governance, institutional accountability, and crisis management. Unlike managerial authority grounded in hierarchical control, academic leadership operates through intellectual legitimacy, professional trust, and negotiated decision-making within loosely coupled organizational structures (Marshall et al., 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In periods of structural crisis, these characteristics create both constraints and opportunities for leadership agency. Drawing on crisis theory, crisis is understood not as an episodic disruption but as a historically produced condition requiring interpretation and judgment (Koselleck, 2006). Grint (2010) distinguishes between technical problems, which invite procedural solutions, and adaptive challenges, which require reframing institutional assumptions. In highly regulated higher education environments, leaders often respond through **managerial compliance** to a mode of leadership oriented toward regulatory conformity, procedural accountability, and bureaucratic risk minimization. While compliance may stabilize organizations

temporarily, it tends to privilege short-term control over long-term institutional learning, thereby reproducing cycles of crisis.

To explain alternative leadership trajectories, this framework integrates **transformational leadership theory** (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) with adaptive leadership scholarship (Heifetz, 1994). Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, intellectual stimulation, and collective motivation, enabling leaders to reframe crisis as an opportunity for institutional renewal. Rather than relying on authority alone, transformational academic leaders engage in sense-making processes that mobilize faculty and staff toward shared meaning and adaptive change. Crisis leadership literature further highlights the importance of communication, legitimacy maintenance, and post-crisis learning in

sustaining organizational resilience (Boin et al., 2005; Moynihan, 2009). Within the context of public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where financial instability and political oversight generate persistent governance tensions, leadership effectiveness depends less on individual capacity and more on the alignment between leadership practices and structural demands. The framework therefore positions leadership failure as a systemic outcome of compliance-oriented governance cultures rather than personal inadequacy. Transformational academic leadership emerges as a mediating mechanism capable of shifting institutions from reactive managerialism toward reflective and adaptive governance.

Conceptual framework:



Structural Roots of the Leadership Crisis in KP Leadership Formation and Grassroots Deficits

Early leadership theories most notably Great Man and Trait approaches conceptualized leadership as an outcome of innate qualities, largely detached from social and institutional contexts

(Carlyle, 1841; Stogdill, 1948). Subsequent scholarship demonstrated that leadership is socially produced and contextually embedded, often emerging in response to collective needs and crises (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2021). Democratic environments characterized by

participation, decentralization, and tolerance for dissent cultivate leadership capacities such as deliberation, negotiation, and collective problem-solving (Dahl, 1989; Putnam, 1993). In Pakistan, however, the erosion of local governments, student unions, and civic platforms has constrained leadership socialization at the grassroots level. This has reinforced hierarchical norms and limited experiential learning essential for democratic leadership development (Jalal, 2014; Haqqani, 2018). Consequently, many institutional leaders including university vice chancellors are products of environments that emphasize compliance over critical inquiry, shaping leadership styles that are risk-averse and administratively oriented.

State Capacity and Leadership Reproduction

The crisis of academic leadership mirrors a broader crisis of leadership reproduction at the state level. Leadership capacity is socially produced rather than individually accidental (Grint, 2010; Northouse, 2021). Weak political leadership marked by patronage, short-termism, and low institutional trust cascades downward, reproducing compliance-oriented leadership across sectors. Governance scholars describe this as vertical institutional mimicry, where organizations adopt the appearance of reform without substantive capacity (Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2013).

Comparative evidence illustrates alternative trajectories. Hong Kong's senior leadership historically emerged from a professional civil service and strong higher education system, enabling technocratic competence and public legitimacy (Lee & Haque, 2006). Singapore's leadership model, underpinned by rigorous education and merit-based recruitment, generated high state capacity and institutional coherence (Quah, 2010). Nordic societies particularly Finland demonstrate how universal education and human development foster reflective leadership and resilient institutions (Sahlberg, 2015; UNDP, 2023). These contrasts underscore that leadership crises in universities are downstream outcomes of broader governance failures.

Educational Fragmentation and Leadership Conditioning

Pakistan's fragmented education system divided among public schools, madaris, elite private institutions, and cadet schools' further compounds leadership deficits. While elite institutions offer limited leadership exposure, dominant streams emphasize rote learning and obedience, discouraging questioning and creativity (Hoodbhoy, 1998; Rahman, 2004). These conditions shape institutional leaders who operate within bureaucratic cultures that constrain dissent. The crisis of academic leadership, therefore, is not an individual failure but a structural outcome of educational and social practices that prioritize conformity over transformation (Altbach, 2015).

Contradictory Governance Regimes in Public Universities

Historically, Pakistan's public universities operated within a Weberian bureaucratic model characterized by centralized authority, hierarchical decision-making, and state responsibility for financing higher education (Weber, 1978). Universities were conceived as public institutions entrusted with knowledge production, citizenship formation, and national development aligned with the welfare-state logic of education as a public good. From the early 1990s, donor-driven reforms promoted New Public Management (NPM), reconfiguring universities as quasi-market actors emphasizing efficiency, performance measurement, competition, and financial self-reliance (Hood, 1991; Osborne, 2010). In higher education, this shift materialized through audit cultures, rankings, commercialization, contractual employment, and the reconceptualization of students as customers (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Deem et al., 2007).

In Pakistan, this transition has been partial and contradictory. Unlike contexts where NPM reforms expanded institutional autonomy, Pakistan retained centralized bureaucratic control over finance, staffing, and governance while simultaneously pressuring universities to behave entrepreneurially (Altbach, 2015). The result is a

contradictory governance ecosystem in which authority is centralized while responsibility is decentralized. Academic leaders are held accountable for financial sustainability and performance metrics without commensurate decision-making power, narrowing leadership agency and transforming vice chancellors into compliance managers. Similar dynamics in aid-dependent systems produce isomorphic compliance rather than substantive reform (Pritchett et al., 2013). In Pakistan, this contradiction redefines leadership away from intellectual stewardship toward procedural accountability and short-term crisis management.

Comparative Perspectives and Implications for Pakistan

A comparative perspective clarifies why leadership crises in public universities are not merely institutional anomalies but outcomes of broader governance and human development trajectories. Countries that have sustained institutional leadership capacity typically exhibit three reinforcing features: (i) coherent state capacity, (ii) investment in universal education, and (iii) stable leadership pipelines within public institutions.

Malaysia’s post-independence trajectory illustrates this interaction. Long-term public investment in

education, bureaucratic professionalism, and development planning produced leadership cadres capable of navigating reform without eroding institutional legitimacy (Khoo, 2003; World Bank, 2020). Strong public universities functioned as leadership pipelines, enabling vice chancellors and senior administrators to combine academic credibility with policy literacy. By contrast, Pakistan’s uneven human development, fragile democratic consolidation, and politicized institutions have weakened leadership reproduction mechanisms across the state (Zaidi, 2015; UNDP, 2023). Low learning outcomes at school level constrain civic competence and democratic accountability, distorting leadership selection processes at higher levels of governance (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). These deficits cascade into higher education. Academic leaders in KP are often administratively experienced but strategically constrained by limited autonomy, unstable policy environments, and weak governance training. Expecting university leaders to reverse institutional decline without addressing upstream constraints in education quality, democratic practice, and state capacity is analytically untenable.

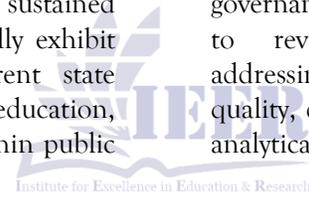


Table 1. Comparative Governance Contexts and Leadership Outcomes

Context	Education Investment	State Capacity	Leadership Outcome
Malaysia	High, sustained	Strong bureaucratic professionalism	Stable, policy-literate institutional leadership
Singapore	High, merit-based	Very high	Coherent leadership pipelines
Finland	Universal, equitable	High democratic capacity	Reflective, autonomous leadership
Pakistan	Uneven, fragmented	Weak, politicized	Compliance-oriented, crisis-driven leadership

Sources: Khoo (2003); Quah (2010); Sahlberg (2015); Zaidi (2015); UNDP (2023).

Knowledge–Power, Managerialism, and Academic Leadership

The transformation of academic leadership under neoliberal governance can be understood through the knowledge–power relationship articulated by Foucault, wherein knowledge operates as a mechanism of discipline by defining

norms, regulating conduct, and producing governable subjects (Foucault, 1977; 1980). In higher education, audit systems, rankings, and performance indicators function as disciplinary technologies that redefine what counts as legitimate leadership and knowledge (Shore & Wright, 2015). In postcolonial and aid-

dependent contexts such as Pakistan, this nexus assumes a neocolonial form. Policy models and evaluation criteria generated in the Global North gain authority through donor conditionalities and global rankings, positioning academic leaders as intermediaries enforcing external scripts rather than autonomous reformers (Altbach, 2015; Haque, 2007). Leadership becomes extractive focused on harvesting measurable outputs rather

than developmental, oriented toward institutional capacity and social relevance.

In KP, where universities operate amid conflict, economic fragility, and weak markets, this regime further constrains leadership agency by privileging compliance with metrics over locally grounded academic priorities. Leadership thus shifts from intellectual stewardship to governance technology, deepening institutional vulnerability.

Table 2. From Academic Leadership to Managerial Compliance

Dimension	Academic Leadership	Managerialized Leadership
Core function	Vision, stewardship, sense-making	Compliance, reporting, target fulfillment
Accountability	Academic community & public mission	Regulators, donors, rankings
Time horizon	Long-term institutional development	Short-term performance cycles
Knowledge base	Disciplinary & contextual	Quantified indicators

Sources: Deem et al. (2007); Middlehurst (2013); Shore & Wright (2015).

Discussion:

Marketization without Markets: Evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

A defining assumption of contemporary higher education reform in Pakistan is that public universities can operate as market-oriented organizations capable of generating revenue through competition, commercialization, and industry linkages. This assumption is particularly untenable in KP, where limited industrial development, weak private-sector research demand, high unemployment, and prolonged conflict constrain functional education markets (Zaidi, 2015; World Bank, 2022).

Despite these constraints, academic leaders are evaluated on “own-source revenue,” partnerships, and self-financing programs. Evidence from developing and post-conflict regions shows such strategies rarely yield sustainable income; instead,

they intensify precarity, encourage short-term program expansion, and exacerbate inequalities across disciplines (Altbach et al., 2009; Marginson, 2016). In KP, commercialization often produces marginal returns while diverting leadership attention toward audits, accreditation paperwork, and financial justifications rather than substantive academic transformation. This paper conceptualizes the outcome as market disaster, a condition where institutions are forced to operate according to market logic without the social, economic, and regulatory foundations necessary for markets to function (Polanyi, 1944). Rather than enhancing efficiency, marketization erodes autonomy, morale, and coherence, exposing universities to volatile revenue streams without improving quality.

Table 3. Marketization without Markets in KP

Policy Expectation	Structural Reality	Leadership Effect
Revenue generation	Weak industry & research demand	Symbolic compliance
Competition	Limited student purchasing power	Program dilution
Autonomy	Centralized control persists	Accountability without authority
Efficiency	Chronic underfunding	Crisis-driven management

Sources: Altbach et al. (2009); Marginson (2016); World Bank (2022).

Leadership Capacity, Governance Literacy, and Institutional Readiness

A critical yet underexamined dimension of the leadership crisis in Pakistan's public universities concerns prevailing assumptions about leadership competence. Senior academic appointments are frequently justified since disciplinary distinction, seniority, or publication records, reflecting an implicit belief that scholarly excellence naturally translates into institutional leadership capacity. While academic credibility is essential, international research consistently shows that effective university leadership requires a distinct set of competencies extending beyond disciplinary expertise (Middlehurst, 2013; Bolden et al., 2012).

Syed Babar Ali has consistently argued that the most profound casualty Pakistan has suffered over the past seven decades is the systematic decline in the quality of education across all levels. In an interview reflecting on higher education governance, he described his experience as a member of a provincial committee responsible for the selection of vice chancellors in Punjab, where he interviewed more than 200 professors from public sector universities. Based on this assessment, Ali observed that none of the candidates met the academic standards required for appointments at a leading private university such as LUMS. This assessment points to a structural rather than individual failure, highlighting how prolonged neglect of merit, politicization of appointments, and weak accountability mechanisms have eroded academic capacity within public universities. From an organizational crisis perspective, such conditions reflect institutional decay marked by high ambiguity, declining performance standards, and leadership deficits, where formal structures persist but substantive academic quality deteriorates. Ali's critique thus reinforces broader arguments that Pakistan's higher education crisis is deeply rooted in governance failures rather than a shortage of talent, with serious implications for knowledge production, leadership development, and national human capital formation (Ali, 2017).

Contemporary academic leaders operate within complex, multi-level governance environments. They are expected to interpret shifting public policy regimes, negotiate with political authorities and regulators, manage large and diverse human resources, oversee institutional finance, and respond to data-driven audit and accountability systems. These competencies collectively referred to here as governance literacy are neither automatically acquired through academic careers nor systematically developed within Pakistan's higher education system. Governance literacy entails working knowledge of public policy processes, political economy, regulatory frameworks, institutional finance, and digital governance.

In the absence of such capacities, leaders struggle to critically assess externally imposed reform agendas or adapt them to local contexts. Evidence from aid-dependent systems suggests that leaders lacking governance literacy are more likely to engage in symbolic compliance, replicating reform templates without substantive institutional change (Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2013; Altbach, 2015). In KP, where universities sit at the intersection of centralized bureaucratic control and donor-driven managerialism, this deficit is particularly consequential. Leaders with limited policy negotiation skills are unable to contest unrealistic expectations, mobilize coalitions, or articulate alternative reform trajectories grounded in regional realities. As a result, experience alone when unaccompanied by structured leadership development narrows leadership practice to administrative routine and crisis containment.

Leadership Disempowerment and Institutional Vulnerability

Censorial constraints on campus speech and growing state oversight have severely curtailed academic freedom in Pakistan, creating an environment in which vice-chancellors as academic leaders are often compelled to prioritise administrative compliance over scholarly leadership (Scholars at Risk, 2017; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2024). Under such conditions, VCs frequently assume the role

of cautious academic managers who implement state directives and avoid contentious scholarship or critical pedagogy, rather than serving as autonomous institutional leaders who cultivate a stimulating academic climate for both students and faculty (Dawn, 2025; Shah, 2024). This dynamic not only diminishes universities' capacity for critical inquiry and intellectual risk-taking but also entrenches managerialism and short-term administrative survival as the prevailing orientation of academic leadership in public universities.

The evidence presented in this study indicates that the crisis confronting public universities in KP cannot be understood without foregrounding the systematic disempowerment of academic leadership. University leaders are increasingly held accountable for outcomes financial sustainability, rankings, research productivity, and institutional reputation over which they exercise limited structural control due to centralized governance, constrained fiscal autonomy, and externally imposed policy frameworks. This configuration exemplifies what governance scholars describe as accountability without authority, a condition that undermines leadership agency rather than strengthening institutional performance (Hood, 1991; Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). Such misalignment has profound organizational consequences. Persistent performance pressure without enabling conditions erodes morale, discourages innovation, and incentivizes risk avoidance (Deem et al., 2007; Shore & Wright, 2015). In KP's public universities, this manifests in leadership turnover, stalled reforms, and recurrent governance crises managed administratively rather than resolved strategically. Long-term planning becomes exceedingly difficult when leadership tenures are unstable, policy signals are inconsistent, and institutional priorities are continually recalibrated in response to audits and funding uncertainties. Instead of building resilience, these dynamics lock universities into cycles of reform fatigue and crisis management.

Comparative higher education research cautions that market-based governance models produce

uneven and often regressive outcomes when transplanted into contexts characterized by weak markets and high social dependence on public institutions (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Marginson, 2016). In regions such as KP, higher education functions less as a tradable commodity and more as public infrastructure essential for social mobility, professional formation, civic integration, and post-conflict recovery. Treating universities primarily as revenue-generating enterprises under such conditions represents a categorical misdiagnosis of their social role and further intensifies institutional vulnerability.

Recommendations:

1. The findings highlight the need to reposition public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as institutions that serve the public good while maintaining financial sustainability. Rather than treating higher education as a quasi-market enterprise, policy frameworks should prioritize stable public investment, mission-based funding, and long-term institutional capacity building. In regions marked by economic precarity and post-conflict recovery, universities function as critical social infrastructure, and funding models must reflect this broader societal role.
2. Governance reform is equally essential. Current arrangements characterized by accountability without authority encourage managerial compliance rather than strategic leadership. Policymakers should reduce excessive centralized micromanagement and grant universities meaningful fiscal and administrative autonomy, while aligning accountability mechanisms with contextual realities. Evaluation systems should integrate global governance standards but move beyond narrow audit cultures to include qualitative indicators such as academic development, community engagement, and institutional learning.
3. Leadership development should be institutionalized through structured training and succession pathways that strengthen governance literacy, crisis leadership, and policy engagement. A contextual hybrid leadership model is

recommended, combining transformational leadership principles with sensitivity to Pakistan's socio-political environment. Such an approach would enable academic leaders to balance global expectations with local institutional needs.

4. Finally, reform agendas must be grounded in contextual realities rather than uncritical policy borrowing. Universities should embed crisis leadership practices, including early warning mechanisms, inclusive decision-making, and post-crisis learning processes, to break recurring cycles of instability. By integrating governance reform, leadership development, and context-responsive strategies, higher education systems can transition from reactive managerialism toward resilient and transformative governance.

Policy Implications and Comparative Discussion

The findings highlight the need to reposition public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as institutions that serve the public good while maintaining financial sustainability. In economically fragile and conflict-affected regions, universities function as critical social infrastructure supporting social mobility, professional formation, and civic integration. Similar debates are evident in India, where increased market-oriented reforms and performance-driven regulation have placed academic leaders between institutional autonomy and regulatory compliance. These experiences suggest that funding frameworks in KP should prioritize stable public investment and mission-based support rather than overreliance on revenue-generation models that risk institutional fragility.

Governance reform remains central to addressing the leadership crisis identified in this study. Current arrangements characterized by accountability without authority encourage managerial compliance rather than strategic leadership. Comparative experiences from Bangladesh demonstrate how centralized governance and politicized institutional environments often push leaders toward short-term administrative responses instead of long-

term organizational learning. Universities in KP therefore require meaningful fiscal and administrative autonomy supported by accountability mechanisms that integrate global governance standards while respecting local socio-economic realities. Evaluation systems should move beyond audit cultures to include qualitative indicators such as academic development, community engagement, and institutional learning.

Leadership development must also be institutionalized through structured programs that strengthen governance literacy, crisis leadership, and policy engagement. Lessons from South Africa show that transformational and context-responsive leadership approaches can support institutional resilience during periods of social and financial transition. A contextual hybrid leadership model is therefore recommended one that combines transformational leadership principles with sensitivity to Pakistan's socio-political context, enabling academic leaders to balance global expectations with local institutional needs while protecting the public-good orientation of higher education. Finally, reform agendas should avoid uncritical policy borrowing. Comparative evidence across India, Bangladesh, and South Africa suggests that effective reforms emerge when global governance practices are adapted through participatory and context-sensitive processes. Embedding crisis leadership mechanisms including early warning systems, inclusive decision-making, and post-crisis learning can help universities in KP move from reactive managerialism toward resilient and transformative governance.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not merely financial or administrative but constitute a structural crisis of academic leadership produced within a contradictory governance ecosystem. Neoliberal reforms inspired by New Public Management have been layered onto an unreformed, centralized bureaucratic state, creating a configuration in which authority

remains concentrated while responsibility and accountability are decentralized. Within this arrangement, academic leadership has been systematically redefined as managerial compliance oriented toward audit regimes, performance metrics, and revenue generation rather than intellectual stewardship, institutional vision, and societal engagement. The analysis further shows that expectations of market-oriented behavior in a province characterized by weak industrial bases, limited labor-market absorption, and prolonged conflict exposes universities to what this paper conceptualizes as market disaster, where market logic undermines rather than enhances institutional resilience. Leadership disempowerment emerges as both a consequence and a driver of institutional fragility: leaders are held accountable for outcomes they cannot structurally control, lack systematic preparation in governance and political economy, and operate with limited autonomy. These dynamics should not be read as individual leadership failure but as the outcome of a broader leadership ecology shaped by low human development, fragile democratic practices, and policy borrowing detached from local realities.

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