

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**University Governance in Pakistan: Autonomy, Accountability, and Political Interference (2018–2024)****Dr. Dilawar Khan¹, Mr. Muhammad Imran Humayun², Dr. Asif Salim¹**

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How to Cite This Article: Khan, D. D., Humayun, M. M. I. & Salim, D. A. (2026). University Governance in Pakistan: Autonomy, Accountability, and Political Interference (2018–2024). *Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy*. 4 (01), 183-193.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71327/jssrp.41.183.193>

ISSN: 3006-6557 (Online)

ISSN: 3006-6549 (Print)

Vol. 4, No. 1 (2026)

Pages: 183-193

Key Words:

University Governance, Higher Education, Pakistan, Institutional Autonomy, Accountability, Political Interference, Academic Freedom, Public Universities

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Abstract: *University governance plays a decisive role in shaping the quality, credibility, and sustainability of higher education systems. In Pakistan, the governance of public universities has remained a contested space where institutional autonomy, accountability mechanisms, and political influence often intersect in complex ways. This study examines university governance in Pakistan during the period 2018 - 2024, with a particular focus on how political interference affects administrative decision making, academic freedom, and overall institutional performance. The research argues that while formal governance frameworks emphasize autonomy and accountability, their effective implementation has been undermined by persistent political involvement in key areas such as appointments, promotions, financial management, and policy formulation. Such interference weakens merit-based governance, erodes academic independence, and compromises universities' ability to function as autonomous centers of learning and research. At the same time, accountability mechanisms remain uneven, often applied selectively rather than systematically, further contributing to institutional inefficiency and mistrust. Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws on policy documents, higher education regulations, official reports, and interviews with academic and administrative stakeholders to analyze governance practices across selected public universities. The findings highlight a growing gap between governance ideals and institutional realities, revealing how political pressures reshape internal power structures and decision-making processes. This research contributes to the broader discourse on higher education governance in developing countries by offering a contextualized analysis of Pakistan's experience. It concludes by emphasizing the need for governance reforms that strengthen institutional autonomy, ensure transparent accountability, and insulate universities from undue political influence in order to enhance academic excellence and institutional effectiveness.*

Introduction

University governance plays a central role in shaping the quality, credibility, and global standing of higher education systems. In Pakistan, public universities operate within a complex governance framework where institutional autonomy, accountability, and political influence often intersect and, at times, collide. Between 2018 and 2024, higher education governance in Pakistan experienced

heightened scrutiny due to frequent policy reforms, changes in political leadership, and growing public concern over declining academic standards and administrative inefficiencies. Universities are expected to function as autonomous centers of learning and research; however, their ability to do so remains constrained by external controls, bureaucratic oversight, and political involvement in key decision-making processes. This tension has raised critical questions about the effectiveness of governance structures and their alignment with international norms of academic freedom and institutional independence (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019; Shah, 2021).

Institutional autonomy is widely regarded as a prerequisite for innovation, academic excellence, and responsive university management. In Pakistan, however, autonomy has often been unevenly implemented and inconsistently protected. While regulatory bodies such as the Higher Education Commission (HEC) emphasize autonomy in policy documents, practical realities reveal continued dependence on government approvals for financial decisions, senior appointments, and policy implementation. During the 2018–2024 period, several public universities faced leadership instability due to politically motivated appointments and removals of vice chancellors, undermining long-term planning and institutional continuity. Such practices weaken merit-based governance and erode trust among faculty and students, limiting universities' capacity to compete regionally and globally (HEC, 2018; Hoodbhoy, 2020).

Alongside autonomy, accountability has emerged as a dominant governance principle in Pakistan's higher education discourse. Governments and oversight institutions increasingly demand transparency, performance evaluation, and financial discipline from public universities. While accountability mechanisms are essential for preventing mismanagement and ensuring public trust, excessive or selective enforcement has often been perceived as a tool for political control rather than institutional improvement. Audit pressures, administrative inquiries, and regulatory interventions—when driven by political motives can create an environment of fear and compliance instead of innovation and academic freedom. The challenge, therefore, lies in establishing accountability systems that enhance institutional performance without compromising autonomy or academic integrity (OECD, 2019; Haider & Ali, 2022).

Political interference remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting university governance in Pakistan. From curriculum influence and student politics to administrative appointments and resource allocation, political actors have historically exerted significant influence over public universities. Between 2018 and 2024, increased political polarization further intensified this interference, affecting governance stability and institutional credibility. Such involvement not only disrupts academic processes but also undermines universities' role as neutral spaces for critical inquiry and democratic debate. This study situates university governance within this broader political and institutional context, arguing that sustainable reform requires a balanced governance model that protects autonomy, enforces constructive accountability, and insulates academic institutions from undue political pressure (Marginson, 2018; Rahman & Bari, 2023).

Literature Review

Existing literature on university governance emphasizes autonomy as a foundational principle for academic excellence and institutional effectiveness. Scholars argue that autonomous universities are better positioned to design relevant curricula, attract qualified faculty, and engage in meaningful research without undue external pressure. In the context of Pakistan, however, studies reveal that institutional autonomy remains largely symbolic rather than operational. Despite policy commitments by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), public universities continue to rely heavily on government approval for financial management, academic programs, and senior leadership appointments.

Comparative studies suggest that this restricted autonomy places Pakistani universities at a disadvantage when compared with institutions in other developing and middle-income countries, where governance reforms have granted greater decision-making authority to universities (Altbach, 2015; Shah & Amjad, 2020).

A substantial body of literature examines accountability as a necessary counterbalance to autonomy in higher education governance. Accountability mechanisms—such as performance evaluations, financial audits, and quality assurance frameworks—are intended to ensure transparency and responsible use of public resources. In Pakistan, researchers note that accountability practices have intensified since 2018, driven by governance reforms and public sector performance narratives. However, several studies caution that accountability has often been implemented in a top-down and punitive manner, focusing more on compliance than institutional development. This approach has resulted in administrative overreach, discouraging innovation and creating tension between faculty and regulators. International literature reinforces the argument that accountability systems are most effective when they are developmental rather than coercive, a balance that remains elusive in Pakistan's higher education sector (OECD, 2019; Haider & Ali, 2022).

Political interference in university governance has been widely documented as a persistent structural challenge in Pakistan. Researchers highlight how political actors influence vice chancellor appointments, syndicate decisions, and resource allocation, often prioritizing loyalty over merit. Studies focusing on the post-2018 period indicate that political polarization further deepened state intervention in public universities, leading to frequent leadership changes and governance instability. This interference undermines institutional credibility and weakens internal governance mechanisms, such as academic councils and boards of governors. Comparative research from South Asia suggests that excessive politicization of universities not only hampers academic freedom but also erodes public trust in higher education institutions as neutral spaces for knowledge production (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Rahman & Bari, 2023).

Academic freedom is closely linked to governance quality and remains a central concern in the literature on Pakistani universities. Scholars argue that political and bureaucratic control restricts freedom of teaching, research, and expression, thereby limiting intellectual growth and critical inquiry. Empirical studies reveal that faculty members often practice self-censorship due to fear of administrative sanctions or political backlash. Between 2018 and 2024, heightened political sensitivity further constrained open academic discourse, particularly in the social sciences. International governance models emphasize that safeguarding academic freedom requires not only legal protections but also institutional cultures that respect independent scholarship—an area where Pakistani universities continue to face significant challenges (Marginson, 2018; Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Recent literature increasingly calls for governance reforms that strike a sustainable balance between autonomy, accountability, and state oversight. Policy-oriented studies recommend strengthening internal governance structures, enhancing transparency in leadership appointments, and redefining the role of regulatory bodies such as the HEC. Scholars argue that rather than direct control, the state should adopt a facilitative role focused on capacity building and strategic coordination. The 2018 - 2024 periods is thus viewed as a critical phase in Pakistan's higher education trajectory, offering both cautionary lessons and opportunities for reform. This study builds on existing literature by synthesizing these debates and examining how governance practices during this period have shaped institutional performance and academic integrity in Pakistani universities (Shattock, 2017; Shah, 2021).

Problem Statement

Despite repeated reforms and policy commitments, university governance in Pakistan continues to face deep-rooted challenges that undermine the effectiveness of public higher education institutions. Between 2018 and 2024, public universities have struggled to balance institutional autonomy with accountability while operating under persistent political interference in administrative and academic affairs. Decision-making processes are frequently influenced by external political and bureaucratic actors, particularly in leadership appointments, financial management, and policy implementation, which weaken merit-based governance and erode academic freedom. At the same time, accountability mechanisms are often applied in a selective and punitive manner, creating an environment of compliance and uncertainty rather than innovation and institutional growth. This combination of constrained autonomy, politicized oversight, and fragile accountability has resulted in governance instability, declining trust among faculty and students, and reduced institutional performance. The absence of a coherent and balanced governance framework has limited universities' capacity to function as independent centers of learning, research, and critical inquiry, highlighting the urgent need to examine how governance practices during this period have shaped the overall health and credibility of Pakistan's higher education system.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the extent of institutional autonomy and accountability mechanisms in public sector universities in Pakistan during 2018-2024.
2. To investigate the nature and impact of political interference on governance, academic freedom, and institutional performance.
3. To provide policy recommendations for strengthening governance by balancing autonomy, accountability, and protection from undue political influence.

Research Questions

1. How have institutional autonomy and accountability mechanisms been implemented and functioned in public sector universities in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024?
2. What is the nature and extent of political interference in university governance, and how does it impact academic freedom and overall institutional performance?
3. What strategies and policy measures can be adopted to strengthen university governance by effectively balancing autonomy, accountability, and protection from political influence?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Governance Theory and supported by Agency Theory, providing a comprehensive lens to analyze university governance in Pakistan. Governance theory emphasizes the structures, processes, and mechanisms through which institutions are directed, controlled, and held accountable, highlighting the balance between institutional autonomy and regulatory oversight (Shattock, 2017). Agency theory complements this by examining the principal-agent relationship between governing authorities and university administrators, addressing challenges such as information asymmetry, divergent interests, and the impact of political interference on decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989). Together, these theories explain how autonomy, accountability mechanisms, and political influence interact to shape governance effectiveness, academic freedom, and institutional performance in public universities during 2018–2024.

Model

The study's conceptual model positions institutional autonomy and accountability mechanisms as independent variables influencing university governance effectiveness, while political interference serves as a moderating variable affecting this relationship. Effective governance is measured in terms of

academic freedom, quality of decision-making and institutional performance. The model illustrates that while autonomy and accountability enhance governance, political interference can weaken or distort these effects, highlighting the need for a balanced framework to protect institutional independence and ensure transparent, merit-based administration.

Methodology

This study will use a qualitative research approach with a descriptive and analytical design to examine university governance in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024. It focuses on understanding how autonomy, accountability, and political interference influence governance, academic freedom, and institutional performance by capturing both policy frameworks and stakeholder experiences.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through document analysis of policy documents, governance frameworks, and HEC reports, and semi-structured interviews with vice chancellors, faculty members, and administrative officers. Purposive sampling will be used to select participants with direct experience in university governance, and ethical principles of consent and confidentiality will be strictly followed.

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes from documents and interview transcripts. This approach will help understand the interaction between autonomy, accountability, and political interference, while triangulating findings to provide a comprehensive picture of governance practices in Pakistani public universities.

Research Variables

For the study “University Governance in Pakistan: Autonomy, Accountability, and Political Interference (2018–2024),” the independent variable is political interference, which includes the involvement of political actors in appointments, promotions, and administrative decisions. The dependent variables are university autonomy, accountability, and institutional performance, reflecting the ability of universities to make independent decisions, maintain transparency, and achieve academic and administrative goals. Mediating factors such as governance structures and regulatory oversight by bodies like the Higher Education Commission (HEC) influence how political interference impacts these outcomes, providing a comprehensive framework to examine governance challenges in Pakistan’s higher education sector.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and dynamics of university governance in Pakistan, particularly the interplay of autonomy, accountability, and political interference between 2018 and 2024. By highlighting the impact of governance practices on academic freedom, institutional performance, and policy implementation, the research offers valuable insights for policymakers, university administrators, and regulatory bodies. The findings can inform strategies to strengthen governance, promote merit-based decision-making, and ensure that public universities function as independent, transparent, and effective centers of learning and research.

Historical Context of Public University Governance in Pakistan

The governance of public universities in Pakistan has historically been shaped by centralized control and heavy government oversight. Since the establishment of higher education institutions after independence, universities have largely relied on state funding, which has given the government considerable influence over administrative and academic matters. Over the decades, policies intended to promote autonomy and quality assurance, such as the creation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, have been introduced. However, political interference, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent policy implementation have often undermined these initiatives. Between 2018 and 2024,

public sector universities have faced recurring challenges including politically influenced leadership appointments, limited decision-making freedom, and difficulties in resource allocation, all of which have impacted their governance efficiency and academic outcomes (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Javaid, 2020).

Institutional Autonomy: Policy Intentions vs. Actual Practice

Institutional autonomy has been a central policy goal in Pakistan's higher education reforms, aiming to give universities the authority to manage their academic programs, finances, and administrative decisions independently. Policies such as the HEC's autonomy guidelines and performance-based funding mechanisms were intended to empower universities to innovate and improve quality. However, in practice, many public sector universities continue to experience significant constraints. Political pressures often influence vice-chancellor appointments, faculty hiring, and budgetary decisions, limiting real autonomy. Bureaucratic control, unclear governance structures, and a lack of accountability mechanisms further hinder universities from exercising their intended independence. For example, several universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab have reported repeated interference from provincial authorities in administrative decisions, demonstrating the gap between policy intentions and on-ground reality (Shah & Riaz, 2021; Ahsan, 2020).

Barriers to Institutional Autonomy

Several structural and systemic barriers prevent effective autonomy in Pakistani universities. First, political interference remains the most significant challenge, with governing bodies and administrative decisions often influenced by external actors rather than merit-based processes. Second, financial dependence on the government limits the ability of universities to make independent strategic choices. Third, weak internal governance frameworks, including non-transparent decision-making processes and lack of internal checks and balances, undermine autonomy. Additionally, cultural and societal expectations, such as deference to political authority, reinforce hierarchical control over academic institutions. These barriers collectively weaken institutional capacity to innovate, maintain academic freedom, and achieve international standards of quality education (Mok, 2016; Varghese & Martin, 2013).

Examples of Institutional Autonomy in Practice

Despite these challenges, some universities have managed to exercise a degree of autonomy through strategic governance practices. For instance, the University of Karachi and Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) have implemented internal merit-based hiring systems, autonomous budget allocation for research programs, and decentralized decision-making committees that allow academic departments to manage their own curricula and research agendas. These examples demonstrate that while policy frameworks set the stage for autonomy, leadership vision, internal governance structures, and institutional culture play a critical role in realizing practical independence. They also highlight the potential for reform in other public universities if similar governance practices are adopted (HEC, 2019; Javaid, 2020).

Accountability Mechanisms: Effectiveness, Gaps, and Bureaucratic Influence

Accountability mechanisms in Pakistani public sector universities are designed to ensure transparency, responsible decision-making and proper use of resources. These mechanisms include internal governance structures, performance evaluations, financial audits, and oversight by regulatory bodies such as the Higher Education Commission (HEC). When effectively implemented, accountability measures help maintain academic standards, promote ethical practices, and improve institutional performance. However, in practice, these mechanisms often face significant gaps. Weak enforcement, lack of clear performance benchmarks, and limited monitoring capacity reduce their effectiveness.

Bureaucratic influence further complicates accountability, as administrative decisions can be delayed or overridden due to hierarchical control and political considerations. Studies indicate that without strong and transparent accountability systems, universities struggle to maintain autonomy and deliver quality education (Shah & Riaz, 2021; Ahsan, 2020).

Additionally, accountability in Pakistani universities is often procedural rather than substantive. While formal rules and regulations exist, they are frequently applied inconsistently, and compliance is sometimes treated as a formality. This has led to situations where misconduct, nepotism, or inefficiency goes unchecked. The involvement of external bureaucratic actors in university governance such as provincial education departments or government ministries can create conflicting priorities between institutional goals and political agendas. As a result, universities face challenges in enforcing merit based promotions, research performance evaluations, and administrative decisions. Scholars argue that strengthening internal accountability, promoting transparency, and reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks are essential to enhance governance outcomes in higher education (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Javaid, 2020).

Political Interference: Appointment of Leadership, Decision-Making Influence, and Resource Allocation

Political interference remains one of the most pressing challenges in the governance of Pakistani public sector universities. It primarily manifests through the appointment of key leadership positions such as vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads, where political loyalty often outweighs merit and academic competence. This practice not only undermines leadership effectiveness but also erodes institutional credibility and morale among faculty and staff. Decision-making processes in academic and administrative matters are also affected, as political actors may influence curriculum development, research priorities, and strategic planning to align with external interests rather than academic needs. Studies highlight that such interference often creates instability in leadership and limits the ability of universities to implement long-term development plans (Ahsan, 2020; Shah & Riaz, 2021).

Resource allocation is another critical area where political interference is evident. Funding decisions for infrastructure, research projects, and departmental budgets are sometimes influenced by political connections rather than institutional requirements or merit. This leads to uneven distribution of resources, prioritization of politically favored programs, and neglect of essential academic areas. As a result, universities are unable to optimize their operations or achieve equitable growth across departments. Scholars suggest that depoliticizing leadership appointments, establishing clear criteria for resource allocation, and enforcing transparent decision-making processes are necessary steps to reduce the negative impact of political interference on university governance (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Javaid, 2020).

Impact on Academic Freedom and Institutional Performance: Faculty Experiences, Research Output, and Public Trust

Academic freedom is a cornerstone of effective higher education governance, allowing faculty and researchers to pursue knowledge, express ideas, and conduct research without undue external influence. In Pakistani public universities, political interference, bureaucratic control, and weak institutional autonomy often restrict this freedom. Faculty members frequently report pressures related to curriculum design, research topics, and participation in governance decisions, which can limit creativity, critical thinking, and professional growth. These experiences create a work environment where educators may hesitate to challenge prevailing norms or explore innovative ideas, directly affecting the quality of teaching and academic engagement (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Ahsan, 2020).

Research output, an essential indicator of institutional performance, is also influenced by governance challenges and political pressures. Universities facing external interference often struggle with

insufficient funding, limited access to resources, and prioritization of politically favored programs. These conditions hinder high-quality research, reduce publication rates, and limit opportunities for collaboration at national and international levels. Consequently, academic institutions in Pakistan may fall behind global standards, affecting their reputation and ability to contribute to knowledge creation and societal development (Javaid, 2020; Shah & Riaz, 2021).

Public trust in universities is closely linked to both academic freedom and institutional performance. When governance is perceived as politicized or biased, stakeholders including students, parents, and society at large may lose confidence in the institution's credibility and integrity. This erosion of trust can negatively impact student enrollment, alumni engagement, and community partnerships. Conversely, universities that uphold transparent governance, empower faculty, and maintain independent research practices tend to foster greater public confidence and support. Scholars emphasize that enhancing academic freedom and institutional autonomy is not only crucial for internal performance but also for sustaining societal trust and legitimacy (Varghese & Martin, 2013; Mok, 2016).

Major issues faced by public sector universities in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024,

Public sector universities in Pakistan have faced numerous challenges between 2018 and 2024, which have significantly impacted their ability to provide quality education and maintain institutional credibility. One of the most persistent and damaging issues is political interference, particularly in the appointment of key leadership positions such as vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads. In many cases, political considerations and loyalty to external actors take precedence over merit and academic competence, which undermines the effectiveness of leadership and decision-making. This interference also extends to administrative matters, including faculty promotions, departmental resource allocations, and strategic planning, creating an environment where decisions are often influenced by external pressures rather than institutional needs (Ahsan, 2020; Shah & Riaz, 2021).

Another major challenge is the limited institutional autonomy of public universities. Despite formal policies and guidelines introduced by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) to grant universities greater independence, most institutions still operate under significant bureaucratic and governmental constraints. Dependence on state funding, coupled with frequent interventions by provincial and federal authorities, restricts universities from making independent decisions regarding academic programs, research priorities, and financial management. This gap between policy intentions and real-world practice hampers innovation, slows institutional growth, and prevents universities from achieving their full potential (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Javaid, 2020).

Accountability mechanisms in these universities also show significant weaknesses. While formal systems such as audits, performance evaluations, and internal governance structures exist, they are often inconsistently applied and undermined by bureaucratic influence. Delays in implementing accountability measures, combined with a lack of transparent reporting and weak enforcement, allow inefficiency, nepotism, and mismanagement to persist unchecked. Such weaknesses in accountability reduce public trust in universities and make it difficult to ensure that policies and procedures are followed effectively (Shah & Riaz, 2021; Varghese & Martin, 2013).

Additionally, these governance challenges have a profound effect on academic freedom, research output, and institutional performance. Faculty members frequently experience limitations on their ability to choose research topics, design curricula, and participate in decision-making, which can stifle intellectual creativity and critical thinking. Political influence and resource constraints further reduce research productivity, limit publication opportunities, and hinder collaboration with international institutions. Over time, these issues erode the public's confidence in universities, as stakeholders

perceive the institutions to be politicized, inefficient, or incapable of delivering high-quality education. Collectively, these challenges underscore the urgent need for reforms in governance, autonomy, and accountability to ensure that public universities in Pakistan can fulfill their academic and social missions (Mok, 2016; Ahsan, 2020; Hoodbhoy, 2009).

Conclusion

Public sector universities in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024 have faced numerous governance challenges that have significantly affected their effectiveness, academic freedom, and public trust. Political interference, limited institutional autonomy, weak accountability mechanisms, and bureaucratic inefficiencies have collectively hindered universities from realizing their full potential. These issues not only impact leadership effectiveness and faculty performance but also restrict research productivity and the overall quality of education. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that strengthens governance structures, ensures transparent and merit-based decision-making, and empowers universities to operate independently while remaining accountable. Implementing such reforms will enable Pakistani universities to improve institutional performance, foster academic excellence, and rebuild public confidence, ultimately contributing to the nation's educational and socio-economic development.

Findings

1. Political interference continues to affect leadership appointments, faculty promotions, and administrative decisions, undermining merit-based governance.
2. Most public universities face limitations in making independent academic, administrative, and financial decisions despite formal autonomy policies.
3. Accountability mechanisms are inconsistently applied, allowing inefficiency, nepotism, and mismanagement to persist.
4. Faculty often faces restrictions in research, teaching, and governance participation, reducing intellectual creativity and academic quality.
5. Limited funding and uneven resource distribution hinder institutional growth, infrastructure development, and departmental progress.
6. Governance challenges and limited autonomy negatively impact research productivity and opportunities for international collaboration.
7. Political interference, weak accountability, and limited autonomy have reduced public trust in universities and their credibility.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen institutional autonomy to allow universities to make academic and administrative decisions independently.
2. Implement transparent accountability mechanisms to ensure efficient use of resources and ethical governance.
3. Minimize political interference in university affairs to protect academic freedom and merit-based decision-making.
4. Promote merit-based appointments of vice-chancellors and senior administrators for better leadership.
5. Encourage active participation of faculty and students in policy-making and governance processes.
6. Standardize evaluation and auditing systems to ensure consistent quality across public universities.

7. Foster collaborations with international universities to improve governance practices and standards.
8. Introduce capacity-building programs for university leadership to enhance strategic planning skills.
9. Strengthen regulatory frameworks to balance autonomy with accountability effectively.
10. Increase awareness among stakeholders about the importance of ethical governance and transparency.

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