

Academic Decision-Making Practices And Governance Structures In Public And Private Universities Of Punjab: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Effective governance of higher education is at the heart of academic decision-making, which affects curriculum design, quality of instruction, and institutional accountability. This research aims to examine the prevailing academic decision-making practices and factors affecting decision-making processes in public and private universities of Punjab, Pakistan. The descriptive survey design was used, and the data were obtained from 120 respondents, such as 40 department heads and 80 faculty members from 10 public and 10 private universities. This was done through the use of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore the processes of decision-making and implementation of academic policies, curriculum development, instructional strategies and evaluation procedures. The findings showed that both sectors are complying with the guidelines of the Higher Education Commission (HEC); however, the decision-making process in the public universities is more centralized and bureaucratic, while in private universities, it is more flexible and participatory, mostly due to administrative and financial concerns. The importance of leadership style, institutional culture, and policy directions in the context of decision-making effectiveness was found in both sectors. The study shows that piloting evidence-based and participatory models of decision making can improve transparency, faculty engagement, and academic quality in Pakistan's higher education system.

Keywords: Academic decision-making practices, governance, higher education, public and private universities, Punjab.

1 Introduction

Higher education is a key pillar of the development of a nation and plays a significant role in its human capital, innovation, and social development. The universities are important actors in the system, as they produce, preserve, and transmit knowledge in the fields of education and research and in community work. Universities are a rapidly growing sector in the developing countries, including Pakistan, both in terms of sheer numbers and the belief that higher education is an important contributor to economic and technological development over the last three decades. The growth has, however, also created complex challenges in institutional governance, academic quality, and evidence-based decision-making. Over the past few decades, higher education reform has attracted sustained scholarly attention, as institutions seek to secure their long-term viability and to demonstrate accountability to the public. Much of this work,

however, has examined isolated aspects of reform, such as governance structure and policy implementation (Awwad et al., 2024).

1.1 Background and Context

The higher education system in Pakistan includes both public and private universities under the supervision of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), founded in 2002 to improve the standards of education, research productivity and accountability of institutions. According to the latest records, there are 35 public sector universities and 25 private sector universities in Punjab province, which include general, technical, agricultural, and medical universities. Each university has a charter approved by the federal or provincial government and has a structure of governance which comprises a Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, a Syndicate, a Senate, an Academic Council, and other statutory bodies that have authority over the academic and administrative affairs of the university.

The public sector universities are mainly government-funded and have a more hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structure. Decision-making is typically at the national level, and policies are generally established by the HEC or provincial government. On the other hand, private Universities have increased in number since the 1990s and are run by corporate management boards, which enjoy more institutional autonomy. These universities also focus on efficiency and competitiveness, as well as profitability, but struggle to balance academic honesty with profitability. Both sectors are responsible for quality assurance to HEC and adherence to national educational frameworks. The regulations serve as a powerful instrument, and their effectiveness depends on the effectiveness of institutional measures to support and standardize the distribution of educational resources in different campus environments (Marín et al., 2022). In Pakistan, however, the institutional capacity required to apply such frameworks consistently is still developing relative to more established systems, and the effectiveness of governance therefore remains closely tied to the quality of educational provision itself (S. N. Ahmed, 2008; Dimmock, 2020).

University governance structure in Pakistan is a system of overlapping authorities. The Senate is generally the highest decision-making body, which approves policy and budget at a more general level. The Syndicate is responsible for the executive decisions such as appointments, promotions and allocation of finances. The Academic Council, on the other hand, is more engaged with academic concerns – curricula, examinations, and research standards. At a faculty level, deans and department heads oversee the running of the teaching and student affairs. In public universities, these bodies work under a state-enforced system, which has a focus on abiding by the policies and directives of the HEC and the government. In private institutions, governance tends to be corporatized, with boards of governors or trustees having significant influence on academic and financial matters.

HEC sets common standards for accreditation of programs, research standards, and standards for faculty advancement, but there is considerable institutional autonomy. The process of curriculum changes at public universities is often bureaucratic and has limited flexibility, and at private universities, program changes may happen faster, but can be questioned for transparency and accountability. In both settings, there are several leadership characteristics, institutional cultures, and data availability that are important factors in the quality of academic decisions. HEC has contributed to the transformation of higher education in various ways through its projects. These initiatives brought the higher education system in Pakistan to the fore. Despite numerous alterations and projects, however, the education sector is still facing numerous obstacles (Amir et al., 2020).

1.2 Academic Decision-Making and Challenges

Including the different causes, education is the only solution to reveal the upcoming days of Pakistan. To sustain the prosperity of the country, a good educational system was required (Terpstra & Schaap, 2022). Academic decision-making in universities involves every decision and judgment in teaching, curriculum design, research priorities, and student assessment. Multiple stakeholders such as faculty, department heads, deans, and administrative leaders, are essential for effective academic governance. Theoretically, decision-making processes through academic councils and committees that are shared among all members of the

academic community are inclusive and transparent. In reality, universities can, however, exhibit different levels of centralization, hierarchical control, and bureaucratic rigidity, which constrain faculty participation in creating policies and programs.

In the theory of bounded rationality, the decision maker is not fully informed and does not have unconstrained decision-making options; he or she is limited by institutional policies and external factors. In Pakistani universities, these are found in the form of an undemocratic decision-making process, inadequate data-based strategies, and sometimes political or administrative influence. Considering these factors, the study of decision-making and factors influencing decisions in various institutional settings becomes significant.

There are multiple obstacles to effective decision-making in the higher education system in Pakistan. First, poor planning with a lack of evidence leads to decisions that are based on intuition, tradition, or external pressure instead of systematic data analysis. Second, less faculty involvement in decision arenas limits innovation and diminishes faculty ownership of institutional objectives. Third, priorities are frequently skewed by political and financial considerations, particularly in public universities, where appointments and allocating resources may be determined by factors outside of the academic arena. At the same time, private universities are caught between the need to be academically credible and financially viable. Further, the lack of robust institutional research units that could produce evidence to support informed decision-making is a further constraint on evidence-driven governance.

1.3 Need for Comparative Analysis

Punjab, being the most populous province and the hub of education in Pakistan, provides an ideal backdrop to examine such differing decision-making contexts. The two sectors have the same national regulatory framework, but they are quite different in terms of autonomy, governance culture, and administrative capacity. This awareness of such similarities and differences can aid in the identification of best practices and reform areas to strengthen governance structures. Comparative research has special significance in the context of Pakistan's move from subjective to objective and evidence-based academic management as a reflection of the international effort to promote accountability and evidence-based quality assurance. The higher education changes, which are somehow related to the new public from the beginning, have been from the perspective of improving the skillfulness and standards in the higher education sector (Alghamdi et al., 2026; van Berckel Smit, 2024).

1.4 Purpose of the Study

In this context, the present study is designed to shed light on the existing academic decision-making process of public and private universities of Punjab, followed for the identification of factors affecting the academic decision-making processes. The study aims to reveal patterns and constraints in institutional decision-making processes that influence governance outcomes by studying these four areas of decision-making: curriculum, admissions, the instructional process, and evaluation. The results will inform policymaking and offer practical guidance to university decision makers who are interested in strengthening evidence-based and participative decision-making systems.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundation of Academic Decision-making

Decision making in higher education means a planned process of choice of alternatives for the fulfillment of the goals of the institution in the fields of teaching, research, and community service. It is an activity of the minds of many participants (administrators, faculty, governing boards), and takes place in an organizational and policy context. In basic terms, selecting one thing in a list of choices is referred to as decision-making. Academic managers are advised to understand that there are several means of carrying out activities in a given situation, as it is recommended. Most of the decision-making is based on the beliefs,

cognition, and interests of a decision maker. The differences in the culture and attributes of the institute immediately have an impact on the decision-making processes of academic managers (van Berckel Smit, 2024).

Besides, the styles of decision making, which lead to the quality and reason of academic managers in universities. It depends on their thinking, use of messages, and how they envision the formation of their university. A person responds to a pattern, and decision-making is determined by the decision situation. But (March et al., 1993), of course, pointed out that the process of decision making is not necessarily rational, and that options are selected in a way that is limited by both information and the institutional rules and human judgment. Academic decisions made in the university involve curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, evaluation processes, staff selection, and student assistance. Decisions in these areas must be effective to guarantee quality assurance, alignment with policy and sustainable institutional performance. Also, Blge & Özer (2005) stresses that academic decisions are reliable and timely when they are made through a leadership style, communication structure and culture of participation within the institution. The study findings show that the head of the institute's rational way of decision making is foremost and modifies the instructor's dedication and contentment (S. N. Ahmed et al., 2025; Shaked & Schechter, 2019).

The present study is based on four complementary models that both reflect rational and contextual aspects of decision making:

(a) Rational Model

The Rational Model of decision making, based on the classical theory of management, advocates that decision making is a logical, step-by-step process that includes problem identification, information collection, option appraisal, and selection of the best option (March et al., 1993). This model applies to higher education, where decisions are based on objective and data-driven decisions. But, in the academic environment where a variety of interests exist, resources are limited, and politics play a role, pure rationality is curtailed.

(b) Bounded Rationality

The rational model was further developed by (March et al., 1993) in Bounded Rationality Theory, which acknowledges that decision-makers have limited information, time, and cognitive ability. They do not maximize but "satisfice" (satisfy with acceptable thresholds) their solutions. In the context of university governance, this translates to the fact that, in practice, academic councils or committees will face constraints on their choice of practical options because of a lack of information, policy guidance from a higher level within the university (such as the HEC), or simply due to the peculiarities of the bureaucratic process.

(c) Political Model

According to the Political Model (Allison & Zelikow, 1999), negotiation, power, and conflicting interests affect the decision-making process in an organization. This sort of thing flourishes in universities, which are very pluralistic institutions. Values and incentives of faculty, administration, and governing boards can differ. This is particularly noticeable in government universities in Pakistan, where government presence and union actions can influence decision-making. Political dynamics also influence private universities, albeit in other ways, and usually in the manner of managerial control and financial stakeholder influence.

(d) Garbage-Can Model

The garbage-can model is a description of the process of decision-making in the university as "organized anarchy", in which issues, solutions, and actors are not coordinated, but only randomly, as a result of their interaction. Academic institutions that lack clear boundaries and objectives are likely to make decisions based on opportunity, which is when it is appropriate, the right players are present, and the issue/question is relevant. This model is appropriate for numerous higher education systems in developing nations, where policy decisions are implemented in response to external events, and where implementation is dependent on personal networks and internal politics (Cohen et al., 1972).

2.2 Role of Governance and Academic Managers

Universities are organizations of persons, established and endowed to achieve the combined goals. Governance lets the universities work, provides them with ways and visualization of their educational managers, such as heads of departments. The managers of academic units are busy every day with the task of making decisions about the planning, implementing and evaluating their academic units' daily operations. Academic managers need to make a dedicated vision, aligned course, instruction, and evaluation to encourage learning among students and to focus on the requirements of the workplace environment and workers (Ahmed & Al-Dhuwaihi, 2020).

This requires a positive and proactive work atmosphere, where employees have positive perceptions of the working environment which support the attainment of system goals. Academic managers must create a conducive environment, provide opportunities for exchanging ideas with others, meet the demands of staff and make the university attain excellence. A stable rapport between academic managers and faculty is necessary for improving impartial dealing of ideas for decision making, and may boost positive impact on the level of trust in the institute. Furthermore, the academic and social development of students is greatly influenced by the university governance structure and social climate created by university leadership (Edjah et al., 2020). From an international perspective, international studies indicate that there is a wide spectrum of university governance; however, shared governance and evidence-based decision making (EBDM) are developing. Curricular and policy decisions in North America and Europe are well supported by faculty senates and academic councils. This study indicates that the influence of academic decisions is influenced by structural mechanisms (decision makers) and cultural mechanisms (decision making) at the same time. Therefore, EBDM is viewed as an important aspect of increasing accountability and quality, as policies are based on institutional data.

2.3 Higher Education in Pakistan

Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan, as a developing nation, has always been overwhelmed with political and economic uncertainty, in which there was only one public university (Punjab University) and no private ones. The instrument of enlarging has been expanded in higher education universities in the last three decades, but the extent of such education has not been systematically measured; the issues of administration and organization, particularly in the public sector, remain a concern (Murtaza & Hui, 2021; Rehman & Huma, 2024).

The administration of higher education institutions in Pakistan has accelerated the process of investigation in the modern world due to the increasing standards internationally and the nation's efforts to align its system with the global standards and national development objectives. Within this context, the governance framework is important for implementing rules intent at rising educational standards, rights, and investigating output. Higher education governance is characterized by an analyzable interaction between laboring bodies, universities and policy structures. However, there have been a few circumstances in which the previous government has had to choose between political intervention and functional ratio, and a lack of institutional freedom. University appointments and resource allocation are jeopardized by political approval, which also thwarts academic freedom and effectiveness. Governance systems in the Pakistani higher education institutions are often opaque and face financial mismanagement problems and poor performance in evaluation systems (Misbah et al., 2024; Murtaza & Hui, 2021).

Higher education systems have various activities in governance and administration, such as decision-making processes, leadership changes, and allocation of resources. (Murtaza & Hui, 2021) explained governance as complicated communications between specific stakeholders that importantly impact educational policy execution and results. This complexity includes an elaborated treatment of these elements in the established governance, composition and practices. Research in the modern era has pointed to the need for good governance to achieve the education policies. Political approvals have a negative impact on academic freedom and effectiveness due to university appointments and resource allocation (Rehman & Huma, 2024). In Pakistan, the governance structures are often opaque and lacking in accountability, with financial mismanagement problems and poor performance in evaluation mechanisms (Misbah et al., 2024).

In particular, the Pakistani institutions of higher education are multi-layered as they are governed by higher education regulatory bodies and the provincial government. Educational policies are developed by the HEC, while administrative responsibilities are implemented by provincial governments. In Punjab, governance is mainly affected by the Punjab Higher Education Commission (PHEC), which guarantees the meeting of institutional goals with educational policies. Research has pointed out some reforms that need to be made to the academic standards, but there are a few obstacles that are yet to be addressed, such as bureaucratic delays (Umar et al., 2021). From empirical evidence, it has been observed in the Pakistani context that the perception of quality of instruction is still a key factor determining academic satisfaction and performance of students, despite the rapid growth of institutions (Firdousi et al., 2024).

2.4 Comparative Analysis of Public and Private Sector Governance

The governance construction and the objective of the policy are said to be significant in bringing reforms to life in education. It includes responsibility execution, decision making and stakeholder relations. Impressive governance enables institutions to accomplish policy aims and incorporate educational necessity (Langrafe et al., 2020). But the issue is that there is a need to balance institutional independence and institutional responsibility. In the U.S., the priority of governance lies in institutional liberty, and accountability is high, including institutions being certified and reporting performances to enhance student learning outcomes (Kallio et al., 2021). In addition, the governance system in Pakistan's higher education institutions has a mix of bureaucratic and emerging participatory systems. For all Universities, it is necessary to have policy congruence with HEC; however, public universities generally have a more centralized administrative hierarchy with policy decisions emanating from the Vice Chancellor, through the senate, Syndicate, and Academic Council. The hierarchical organization is good for consistency, but can also slow down innovation because of multiple layers of approvals. On the other hand, private universities, which are run by a board of trustees or directors, have more flexibility but may not always be focused on academic consultation, with an emphasis on financial viability instead (Hinduja et al., 2023). Such a shift to privatization may create different public narratives, with worries over the potential for profit motives, and possibly the marginalization of state-funded public institutions (Photopoulos et al., 2025).

In the past, it has been found that the involvement of faculty in academic decision-making is lower in both sectors, especially the private, when considering sector-specific challenges. Bureaucratic procedures and political influences tend to influence decision-making in public universities, and managerial and market considerations in private institutions. As higher education is the dominating origin of developing information and awareness, the system is facing new requirements and hurdles due to the global shift in the national view into a global view (Haque, 2019). These challenges can only be resolved through a multi-stakeholder approach to improve the freedom of universities to take autonomous decisions about resource allocation and curriculum change. To overcome the financial pressure on these organisations, alternative financing options, such as Public-Private Partnerships, can be explored and put in place as an actionable option (Ayesha, 2025; Looni et al., 2025).

2.5 Conceptual Framework and Gap

Several factors affecting the effectiveness of decision-making have been identified in the literature in relation to universities. Some of these are leadership styles, such as transformational and participative leadership, which foster transparency and engagement, while authoritarian leadership stifles creativity (Bolden et al., 2009). Also, policies and regulations that are applied by strictly complying with HEC policies provide quality control; however, they restrict institutional innovation. Finally, the external environment of politics, economic instability and globalization influences priorities and decision-making at universities. The different factors at work in public and private sectors suggest the need for comparative investigation.



Figure 1: Integrated Decision-Making Framework for University Policy

This study adopts an Integrated Decision-Making Framework combining the Bounded Rationality, Political, and Evidence-Based Governance models. The framework recognizes that university decisions are bounded by policy structures (HEC guidelines), influenced by institutional politics (power and leadership), and can be strengthened through evidence-based approaches (data-driven and participatory processes).



Figure 2: Conceptual Flow

This framework is conceptual, as follows:

Inputs: Institutional type (public/private), leadership style, HEC policy environment, stakeholder involvement.

Processes: Decision formulation with bounded rationality and negotiation (Political Model).

Outputs: Academic policies and practices regarding admissions, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Feedback: Evaluation and participatory governance based on evidence to shape future decisions.

The framework proposed that rational data use in the academic decision-making process takes place within a politically feasible and collaborative framework. It is the extension of Simon's (1976) bounded rationality concept with the addition of evidence-based management concepts applicable in the context of developing countries' governance in higher education.

Although a large number of studies have been conducted in the field of University Governance, there is limited empirical research that looks into the process of decision-making in the context of the mixed system of higher education in Pakistan. This is an effort to fill this gap, as this research has provided a comparative analysis of public and private universities of the state of Punjab, focused on the process of decision-making, the people involved, and the decision-making process.

The study has two main goals:

1. To find out about existing practices in decision-making in academic matters in public and private universities of Punjab.
2. To find out the factors that could be influencing the decision-making process in these universities.

3 Method

The survey method is a research method that is designed to gather data from population members to describe the condition of that population in terms of one or more variables at a single point in time Kochhar (1992).

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive study is applied in order to find and discover the characteristics of the variables in the conditions. Hence, the descriptive study intends to give researchers a profile or describe prospects of the phenomena being researched at various levels, such as single, systematic, industry-oriented, and other views (Creswell, 2017). This study is recommended as a part of or a preparation for an exploratory study, and therefore, it is necessary to have an understanding of the phenomena earlier on by conducting an exploratory study. A descriptive survey design was used for the study, which was exploratory and comparative in nature, to explore and compare academic decision-making processes in public and private universities of Punjab. This design was suitable for collecting quantitative and qualitative data to describe existing practices, structures, and factors influencing the governance of higher education, as suggested by Bryman (2016)

3.2 Participants

The population consisted of 35 public universities and 25 private universities recognized by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Punjab. Twenty universities (10 public and 10 private) were chosen using simple random sampling. This resulted in 120 respondents (80 faculty members and 40 heads of departments) from twenty universities that took part in the research.

Table 1 Sample of the Study

University Sector	No. of Universities	Heads/Deans	Faculty Members	Total
Public Sector	10	20	40	60
Private Sector	10	20	40	60
Total	20	40	80	120

3.3 Instruments

Based on the objectives and literature review, two research instruments were created. Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Deans and Heads of Departments to gain qualitative information about decision-making authority, consultation processes, and influences. A semi-structured interview is a type of research that is widely used in social sciences. A semi-structured interview was used as an exploratory interview. They then describe the general structure of the semi-structured interview, which is usually based on a guide, and which is usually focused on the main topic, giving a general pattern. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview, although it has topical lines of inquiry that have been pre-determined, also gives the researcher a chance for a deep dive to find discovery. Interviews have led to the creation of the literature in anthropology, for instance. The interview generally plays a narrative role in exploring the life story of a person or group of people. Faculty questionnaire to collect quantitative data on the areas of decision, consultation, and governance.

3.4 Validation and Pilot Testing

Content validity, clarity, and comprehensiveness of the instruments have been validated by experts from the University of Wah. 10 faculty members (not included in the main study) were used in the pilot test.

Some minor changes were made to the items based on feedback, including rewording unclear items and eliminating redundancies. The coefficient of reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.78).

Table 2 Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	Cronbach's Alpha	Standardized Alpha	No. of Items
Questionnaire	0.780	0.687	—

It was found that there was high reliability in the research instrument. Moreover, statistically high correlation among the items was found after deletion of four items as desired by the expert.

3.5 Procedures

Data collection was conducted personally by the researcher and trained research assistants. Visits were made to all sample universities across Punjab to administer the questionnaire and conduct interviews. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and informed that data would be used solely for academic research.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency distributions) to compare trends across public and private universities. Qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and validate quantitative findings. Results were interpreted with reference to decision-making domains, institutional authority, and influencing factors.

4 Results

4.1 Academic Decision-Making Practices in Public and Private Universities

Areas of Academic Decision-Making

Results from faculty questionnaires revealed that academic decisions are made in several key domains, including admission policies, course development, instructional strategies, evaluation, and student support services. Table 3 summarizes the responses from public and private university faculty members.

Table 3 Types of Academic Decisions in Universities

S#	Type of decisions	Public Univ.		Private Univ.	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Admission policy to give admission in different disciplines	82	18	79	21
2	Development of courses/contents of courses	73	27	81	19
3	Instructional strategies/ delivery services	70	30	72	28
4	Evaluation and assessment	85	15	86	14
5	Students support services	87	13	85	15

Table 3 shows that both sectors are actively involved across all five domains of academic decision-making, with agreement above 70% in every case. The clearest sectoral difference lies in course and content development, where private universities report notably higher involvement (81%) than public universities (73%), consistent with their greater institutional autonomy over programme design. Differences in the

remaining domains are marginal — admission policy (82% public, 79% private), instructional strategies (70% and 72%), evaluation and assessment (85% and 86%), and student support services (87% and 85%), and are not interpreted here as meaningful sectoral distinctions. This convergence suggests that HEC's standardised frameworks exert a levelling influence across both sectors in the domains they most directly regulate.

In interviews, heads of departments of private universities emphasised curricular flexibility and classroom innovation, while heads of public universities more often framed assessment and student support as matters of compliance with established standards, a difference of orientation rather than of reported activity.

Authorities Responsible for Academic Decisions

Participants were requested to consider different governing bodies and administrative offices within their institutions to determine the authority that is exercised in making academic decisions.

Table 4 Authorities Responsible for Academic Decision-Making

S#	Name of authority	Public Univ.		Private Univ.	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Vice Chancellor	65	35	68	32
2	Registrar	64	36	59	41
3	Dean	63	37	60	40
4	Academic council	84	16	89	11
5	Senate	87	13	88	12
6	Chairperson	60	40	62	38
7	The Syndicate	65	35	64	36
8	Boards of Faculties and Studies	54	46	60	40
9	The Advanced Studies and Research	50	50	65	35

Based on Table 4, it is found that Academic Council/Senates are the highest decision-making bodies in academic matters, as stated in university charters, both in public and private universities. Bureaucratic decision-making happens in public institutions, with formal approval processes, while boards of governors or trustees make final decisions on major academic and administrative policies in private institutions. Interview data also indicated that there is a high level of influence for Vice Chancellors and Academic Councils in public universities, while the owner or managing director of private universities can make a final decision most of the time.

Faculty and consultation

One of the key factors to participatory governance is faculty involvement in decision-making. The findings showed that most of the faculty members felt that their inputs were sought, with some having more influence than others in both sectors.

Table 5 Consultation with Faculty Members in Decision-Making

Public Univ.		Private Univ.	
Yes	No	Yes	No
88	12	86	14

As seen in Table 5, there seems to be a tendency on the part of both public and private universities to value faculty input. The interviews revealed a subtle difference: consultations at public universities are more likely to be done by departmental committees or faculty boards, and consultations at private universities may be informational, rather than collaborative. Heads in public institutions stressed the importance of “consultation” to “own” decisions, and heads from private universities acknowledged that “the final decision lies with management, though faculty opinions are taken into account.

Decision-Making in Admissions, Curriculum, and Evaluation

The results from the instruments indicate that in both sectors, admission, course development and evaluation processes are managed based on merit and standardized

Table 6 Academic Decision Practices by Domain

Decision Domain	Public Universities (%)	Private Universities (%)
Merit-based admissions	90	86
HEC-guided course development	85	90
Use of development committees	74	82
Project-based assessments	52	73
Formative evaluations	87	85
Summative evaluations	63	74

As shown in Table 6, both sectors have a good level of policy compliance. However, private universities demonstrate more focus on assessment based on projects and performance. Formative assessment and standardized examinations are more likely to be used in public universities. This reflects the differences in structure and resources between the two systems. Qualitative responses confirmed this pattern: heads in public universities saw evaluation as heads in public universities. As a procedure to “maintain quality and ensure fairness”, the heads of private universities described. It means to “measure creativity and applied learning.”

Student Support and Feedback Mechanisms

The study also investigated the decision-making process for the support and learning of the students. Facilitation

Table 7 Student Support Services and Feedback

Support Area	Public Universities (%)	Private Universities (%)
Availability of learning materials	69	71
Use of library and reference resources	51	50
Internet and technological access	52	68
Interactive and group learning programs	59	71
Feedback on student work	86	88

The results of Table 7 indicate a common focus on student support and academic feedback in both sectors, but with technology-enhanced learning resources more available in private universities. This was confirmed by the interview data, which revealed investments in digital platforms and modern teaching aids by the heads of private universities, and insufficient infrastructure and funding by the heads of public universities.

4.2 Factors Affecting Academic Decision-Making

The second goal explored factors influencing academic decision-making in both sectors internally and externally. Faculty/heads' responses pointed to differences in leadership style, organizational culture, resources, and policy influence.

4.3 Institutional and Organizational Factors

The top two internal influences were leadership and culture. The respondents at public universities reported a hierarchical decision-making process, with clear decision-making roles, and slow decision-making processes. On the other hand, the private university respondents described their environment as managerial and flexible, but sometimes “dominated by top management decisions.” “The quality of the decision is dependent on openness and the willingness of the leaders to share authority,” many heads noted. There was a minimal amount of evidence used to inform planning in both sectors, and the decisions were often made by reacting to policy directions or administrative priorities rather than through systematic data analysis.

4.4 External Factors and Policy Environment

Government policies, globalization, and economic pressures are just some of the outside factors. Uncertainty, in addition to affecting decision-making processes, also has an impact on these processes.

Table 8 External and Environmental Factors Affecting Decision-Making

Factor	Public Universities (%)	Private Universities (%)
Globalization and modern trends	83	88
Changing academic workforce	77	74
Political and economic uncertainty	68	71
Lack of proper decision systems	72	78

Table 8 shows that both sectors agree that the global reforms in education and HEC's focus on shifting the educational system to outcomes based have forced universities to modernize curricula and align learning

outcomes with international standards. Both public and private universities reported, however, that they had to deal with certain challenges: public universities mentioned bureaucratic red tape, and private universities indicated that they faced resource pressures and competition from the market. Interviews validated that HEC is the dominant external influence on academic choice. Deans and heads repeatedly described their institutions as "implementers of national directives" rather than "autonomous innovators."

4.5 Decision-Making Climate and Autonomy

Perceptions of decision-making autonomy differed clearly between the two sectors. Public universities were described as institutionally rigid, with limited flexibility arising from statutory approval chains and HEC compliance requirements. Private universities were described as structurally more agile but differently constrained: their boards operate on market principles, and decisions are shaped by the priorities of financial stakeholders rather than by bureaucratic procedure. Neither sector, however, reported overt political interference in academic decisions; across both, respondents indicated that external pressure groups did not directly influence institutional choices. Private universities reported greater agility in implementing policy once decided, whereas public universities emphasised accountability, expressed through documentation-based and procedural checks.

4.6 Comparative Interpretation

Overall, the comparative analysis reveals different but similar trends in decision-making in the public and private universities in Punjab:

- Public universities focus on regulation, deliberation (via statutory bodies) and transparency of procedures, but are hindered in their activities by bureaucracy and weak autonomy.
- Private universities focus on effective utilization, innovation, and quick implementation, while typically giving control to leadership team members, limiting faculty involvement.
- In both systems, HEC directives are the big picture ones that standardize but restrict local contextualization.
- Institutional responses to academic decision-making are further distinguished by the factors of leadership style, resource availability and global pressures.

5 Discussion

This study provides an account of academic decision-making processes in public and private universities in Punjab, Pakistan. The findings indicate that the Bounded Rationality, Political, and Evidence-Based Governance models together help explain how institutional, regulatory, and leadership factors shape decision-making in these institutions. An important dimension of these dynamics is the influence of individual administrative behaviour, since decision-making style can be understood as a learned and habitual response that an administrator brings to recurring decision situations. The data analysis revealed that there were several themes, such as the involvement of different public administrative paradigms in the learning reform process, which was also supported by the literature review (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

The study showed that the practices of academic decision-making are generally the same in both public and private universities, indicating that the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has a strong regulatory influence. The faculty and heads in both sectors reported that decisions are made regularly in key areas like admission policy, curriculum development, instructional strategies, student evaluation and support services, and they are put into practice according to the directions of national policy. It is a pattern that can be explained by the Bounded Rationality Theory, which suggests that institutional actors make decisions according to policy and/or cognitive constellations, but not completely autonomously. Private universities are more flexible and responsive to change, while public universities have a stronger reliance on the procedure of decision-making and formal committee structures. This double pattern illustrates how institutional factors and policy dependence restrict rational decision-making to satisfactory results. Academic autonomy acquires a certain type of monopoly to use its functions in the country (Kuhlmann et al., 2025).

It was found that more than 85 per cent of respondents in both sectors knew that these are the ultimate decision-making bodies. The Political Model of Decision-Making (Allison & Zelikow, 1999), however, offers greater insight: the result of a decision is sometimes a function of power distribution, negotiation, and influence within the institution. Political bureaucracy and multi-layered approval processes delay decisions in public universities, and financial boards or owners determine the decisions in private universities. Through faculty interviews, it was found that in both systems, authority does not rest entirely with the academic person, but with a hierarchical or managerial authority, suggesting that there is a rational and a political dimension to governance. This form of ownership, where the managing director or owner is often the ultimate decision maker, is clearly linked to the 'Political Model' of negotiations between elite stakeholders and the 'Managerialism' paradigm in which institutional decisions are made based on financial considerations over academic advice (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Hinduja et al., 2023).

Faculty involvement is also high (88% for public, 86% for private), but from a qualitative standpoint, there is some indication that faculty influence is not significant during the decision process. Committees are consulted by faculty members, but policy directions or administrative approval have a significant influence on decisions. This is a small-scale participatory practice which indicates a lack of formal consultation and shared governance, aspects which are important in the Evidence-Based Governance Model. To achieve a true participatory decision-making process, the needs and contributions of stakeholders must be systematically included in a documented form in the form of data, needs analysis, and academic assessment indicators, which are still in development for both sectors.

Findings show both sectors are merit-based in admissions and curriculum and are nationally consistent. Private universities report a bit more project-based and applied assessment (73%) while public universities prefer formative and standardized assessment (87%). This distinction is explained by the missions of the different types of institutions: employability and market demand being the primary concerns of private institutions, while academic quality and transparency of procedures are the major concerns of public universities. Likewise, the provision of support services to students is well recognised in both sectors, with more than 85% of the respondents agreeing that there are regular mechanisms for providing support. There is, however, a shortage of resources, with public universities suffering from problems related to the lack of infrastructure, and private universities providing technology-based tools and interactive learning environments. Such differences highlight the influence of organizational resources and leadership priorities on academic services, which align with the Political and Bounded Rationality approaches in which institutional decisions are made based on resources allocated and on environmental constraints.

Although there are general similarities, there are contrasting features seen in the sectors. The public university is a bureaucratic institution with a sense of prestige and emphasis on procedure, while the private university is an institution with managerial autonomy, financial orientation, and flexible management. 83% of public and 88% of private respondents confirm that globalization, technology integration, and shifts in the academic workforce have impacted both sectors. The results of this research confirm that the academic decision-making process is working under the dual pressure of HEC policy and decision-making processes in the universities themselves. In the transition from compliance to innovation, universities need to have evidence-based, participatory, and data-driven governance structures.

6 Conclusion

The study findings reveal that academic decision-making, in both public and private universities of Punjab, has a high level of similarity in terms of structure, process, and focus, which shows that the decision-making practices are standardized throughout the country and under the guidance of the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The result indicates that the universities in both sectors are governed in a centralized manner. The comparative information also shows that, in general, the public universities are more bureaucratic and hierarchical, operate with greater transparency and procedural rigor, have a stronger focus on rules and procedures, are more likely to consider financial boards, and are more motivated by market-driven priorities, while the private universities tend to be more flexible and responsive to the manager, more focused on money and financial reasoning, and more likely to include financial boards. Although there are

some differences in the procedures, the two sectors alike depend on the HEC guidelines to influence their admission, curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment procedures. Academic decisions are therefore constrained by regulation or rules, as seen in the Bounded Rationality Theory, which assumes that decision makers operate under institutional and informational constraints instead of full autonomy. Another manifestation of the Political Model of Decision-Making is the distribution of authority and influence among actors in the university, the perception of public institutions as being run by bureaucrats, and private ones as being run by bosses. Despite procedural variations, both sectors share a common reliance on HEC guidelines in shaping their admissions, curriculum, instructional strategies, and evaluation processes.

Another key conclusion is that faculty consultation, though widely practiced in both public and private universities, often remains symbolic rather than transformative. Faculty members are invited to participate in discussions and committees, but their recommendations rarely alter outcomes, which are predominantly shaped by top-level authorities and HEC policy directions. Nonetheless, this consultation process, even in its limited form, represents an important step toward participatory governance in higher education. Moreover, the two sectors have shown high compliance in applying merit-based admissions, standardized testing procedures, and student support services, highlighting their shared dedication to education quality and equal opportunity. The outcomes also indicate that external influences, such as political factors or other group influences, have little direct effect on academic decision-making; such decision-making is predominantly made within institutional legal frameworks. However, indirect pressures still determine priorities for decisions and the pace of implementation. Globalization, technology, and shifts in the academic workforce were noted as other factors that impact the nature and trajectory of decision-making, especially adaptation to international standards in curriculum and instructional approaches. In conclusion, the academic governance in the universities is a mixed governance model that suggests a national regime, but is adapting at the institutional level. It is still quite a formal process, law and policy-led, but, at the same time, adaptable to new academic, technical, and world issues as they arise. The study finds that the effective governance of higher education institutions can only be achieved if it moves from the compliance culture to a participatory and evidence-informed decision-making culture where faculty are given autonomy, and accountability is introduced through appropriate transparency of decision-making. Such a transformation would enhance the quality and relevance of higher education and allow universities to be more active in tackling changing social and economic requirements in the country.

6.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in order to enhance academic governance and decision-making in higher education. The HEC should give universities more flexibility when developing academic programs and policies to meet regional and disciplinary requirements, particularly in the case of public institutions. The universities should create units for data analytics and institutional research to assist in policy development, evaluation of the results of policies, and research into the use of research evidence in policy making. Involving faculty should be more than consultation; it should be part of the decision-making process, such as through departmental councils, participatory committees, or feedback that directly influences policy decisions. Managers and leaders from the university must be trained to make managerial and strategic decisions in a transparent, participatory, and adaptable manner that corresponds to the best practices in the world. There should be a balance between teaching and research quality and output for both Public and Private Universities. Digital management systems and academic dashboards should be used to monitor the performance of the institution and to deliver real-time information for decision-making. Periodic evaluation of university governance structures by HEC needs to ensure that decision-making remains transparent, equitable, and directed toward national educational goals.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into academic decision-making in Punjab's universities, its findings should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. The study was confined to universities in the province of Punjab. Pakistan's higher education landscape is diverse; the results may not be fully generalizable to the entire country and other provinces like Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. A large, more stratified sample could have added a wide range of perspectives. The sample, consisting of

80 faculty and 40 heads from 20 universities, while adequate for a descriptive study, is relatively small for making broad generalizations about the entire sector. The study focused on decision-making practices at one time. To see the long-term impact of academic quality and institutional performance, a longitudinal design would be necessary to understand how these academic decision-making processes evolve and how decisions are implemented over time. The study used a descriptive survey design, and the analysis was limited to frequencies and percentages. No inferential or correlational tests were conducted, so apparent differences between the two sectors are descriptive rather than statistically verified, and no claims about association or causality between factors such as leadership style and faculty participation can be made. Future work using inferential analysis would be needed to establish whether the patterns reported here are statistically significant.

6.3 Future Research Recommendation

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following avenues for future research are proposed to deepen the understanding of academic governance in Pakistan and similar contexts. Future studies need to include a comparative analysis of universities from other provinces of Pakistan. To explore discipline-specific decision-making, research could also focus on specific types of institutions, e.g., engineering, medical, or arts universities. A more in-depth mixed-methods approach, incorporating ethnographic observations and prolonged engagement with a few case-study universities. This study focused on faculty and administrators. The perspective of students, as the primary beneficiaries of academic decisions, is largely absent. It could be explored how decisions impact the learning experience of students. A comparative study can be conducted between universities in Pakistan and those in other developing or developed countries, in which there is a need to highlight unique contextual challenges, transferable practices, and the global influences on local governance structures.

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