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## **Accidental Leaders: Experiences and Perspectives of Higher Education Leaders in Pakistan**

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## **Accidental Leaders: Experiences and Perspectives of Higher Education Leaders in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

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This research explored the experiences and perspectives of university leaders in Pakistan. Using a qualitative narrative approach, we explored leadership stories, challenges, and opportunities at various positions unique to the Pakistani context. Findings underscored the accidental nature of higher education leadership in Pakistan, the significance of mentoring provided by teachers and family support for nascent academic leaders, as well as the challenges these academic leaders face ranging from financial barriers to teaching quality issues, to retention of foreign qualified faculty. The research offers several policy recommendations including institutionalized leadership training and support for promising leaders; transparency in policies regarding leader appointment, promotion, and succession; support for existing universities rather than expansion; and addressing brain drain due to the attrition of foreign qualified faculty members.

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**Keywords:** Academic Leadership, Public Universities, Higher Education Commission, Narrative Research

# Líderes accidentales: experiencias y perspectivas de los líderes de la educación superior en Pakistán

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## Resumen

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Esta investigación exploró las experiencias y perspectivas de líderes universitarios en Pakistán. Usando un enfoque narrativo cualitativo, exploramos historias de liderazgo, desafíos y oportunidades en varios puestos exclusivos del contexto pakistaní. Los hallazgos subrayaron la naturaleza accidental del liderazgo en la educación superior en Pakistán, la importancia de la tutoría brindada por los maestros y el apoyo familiar para los líderes académicos emergentes, así como los desafíos que enfrentan estos líderes académicos, que van desde barreras financieras hasta problemas de calidad de la enseñanza y retención de extranjeros calificados. facultad. La investigación ofrece varias recomendaciones de políticas que incluyen capacitación en liderazgo institucionalizado y apoyo para líderes prometedores; transparencia en las políticas de designación, promoción y sucesión de líderes; apoyo a universidades existentes en lugar de expansión; y abordar la fuga de cerebros debido a la deserción de profesores extranjeros calificados.

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**Palabras clave:** Liderazgo Académico, Universidades Públicas, Comisión de Educación Superior, Investigación Narrativa

**P**akistani higher education is still in its developmental stages as the country is relatively young, having achieved independence in 1947. Over the last two decades, Pakistani higher education has expanded considerably with funding as well as accountability for its Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Given the nation's aspirations for its universities to make their mark in international higher education, the leadership at Pakistani research universities plays a critical role in achieving these goals. Individuals at varying levels of academic leadership are in an ideal position to identify and suggest measures to address gaps in higher education leadership and policy in Pakistan. However, their perspectives are rarely highlighted in current qualitative research. Undoubtedly, quantitative research provides important insights into the academic leadership picture; however, this picture remains incomplete without the in-depth knowledge that resides in stories that emerge from the experiences of leaders in academia. Therefore, this research aims to shed light on higher education leadership in Pakistan through leaders' experiences with, and perspectives on the challenges of academic leadership, and offer suggestions to help address these challenges.

For this study, leadership refers to positional leadership in academic organizations, such as Vice-Chancellor/Rector, Dean, Director, Department Head to name a few (Birnbaum, 1992). Academic organizations refer to Pakistan Higher Education Commission (HEC) recognized universities or institutions of higher education that offer undergraduate and graduate degrees. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the leadership experiences of academic leaders at research universities in Pakistan?
2. What are the major challenges facing Pakistani higher education and how can they be overcome?

## **Literature Review**

Leadership definitions run the gamut from leadership as a combination of certain traits (Stogdill & Bass, 1981) to leadership as a blend of actions and attitudes (Heifetz, 1994). For example, Stogdill's (1948) survey of leadership studies uncovered certain traits that were consistently associated with leaders, which included such characteristics as intelligence, self-confidence, and persistence. Indeed, these trait theories continued even until the last two decades of the twentieth century (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). The following definition by Northouse (2016) captures the complexity inherent in the concept of leadership: "Leadership is a process whereby individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6).

## **Academic Leadership**

Most of the studies on leadership have focused on business leaders, and as a social science field, higher education tends to borrow theoretical frameworks from business, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. In the last few decades, academic leadership has received considerable scholarly attention, as continuing trends of the marketization of higher education have led to closer scrutiny of higher education institutions as business organizations, and their leaders as business leaders (Giroux, 2014; Marginson, 2011).

Higher education organizations are often described as "organized anarchies" (Cohen & March, 1974, p. 3), "loosely-coupled systems" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 37), and "professional bureaucracies" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 79), and as such cannot be governed in the same way that other organizations are managed. Higher education organizations are not built like other organizations in their hierarchy and mechanisms, and vary depending on their mission and context, therefore, leadership approaches that do not account for the unique nature of academic organizations can cause great difficulty and even failure and harm (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum,

1989; Birnbaum, 1988). Hence, it is important to pay attention to context in research on higher education leadership.

Trow (1985) defined academic leadership thus, “Leadership in higher education in large part is the taking of effective action to shape the character and direction of a college or university, presumably for the better” (p. 143). Similarly, Astin and Astin (2000) emphasized that “leadership is a purposive process which is inherently value-based.” (p. 8)

Scholars agree that academic leaders have a substantial influence on the institutions they lead and that the beliefs and values they bring have the potential to shape the organizations they lead and their perspectives can reveal in-depth knowledge of the academic system in which they operate (Baig, 2010; Mahoney & Khwaja, 2016; Shamir et al., 2005). Furthermore, their approach to leadership within their organizational context can be understood by the stories leaders tell about themselves and their experiences (Shamir et al, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Weick, 1995).

### **Academic Leadership in Pakistan**

Pakistan has its own academic culture and subcultures, and Western theories of leadership have limited application in its context (Khwaja, 2020; Amin, Shah, & Tatlah 2013; Awan, Zaidi, & Bigger, 2008; Brumfiel & Inman, 2008; Bodla & Nawaz, 2010; Hayward, 2009; Iqbal & Iqbal, 2011; Simkins, Sisum, & Memon, 2003). This limited application is linked to research consistently highlighting that, unlike many large Western universities, which as mentioned before are described as “professional bureaucracies (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 79) and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 2000), academic institutions in Pakistan remain tightly coupled and hierarchical with a disproportionate amount of power concentrated in the office of the Vice-Chancellor or Rector (Anwar, Yousuf, & Sarwar, 2011; Tauqir, Hussain & Azhar, 2014). Hence, academic institutions in Pakistan are quite different from those in Western countries, which have received more attention in the

scholarly literature, highlighting the critical importance of context when examining leadership in higher education. Furthermore, gender disparity – rife in academic leadership globally – is more pronounced in the South Asian region, including Pakistan (Morley & Crossouard, 2015).

The establishment of the Pakistan Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002 has profoundly transformed Pakistani higher education (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Qazi, Raza & Jawaid, 2014). The HEC is an autonomous institution, responsible for regulating, funding and accrediting HEIs nationwide. The HEC’s focus on higher education as an engine of the economy guides how and what sort of academic leaders are appointed, particularly at the highest leadership positions of Vice Chancellor/Rector; however, the process of leader appointment at all levels is politically charged and far from transparent (Tauqir, Hussain, & Azhar, 2014). Over its nearly 20-year history, the commission has not only faced instability, but has seen its funding slashed considerably and has come under greater scrutiny and criticism for misusing funds, accusations of corruption, and lack of transparency (Blumfiel & Inman, 2010; Hayward, 2009; Hoodbhoy, 2020). This prevailing instability in Pakistani higher education requires effective leadership at universities to steer these institutions through these challenges, as well as policy measures to facilitate the leaders.

Qualitative studies on academic leadership in Pakistan are few and often lack rigor, while a narrative approach to the study of academic leadership to gain an insight into leader perspectives and experiences is completely missing from the literature on higher education leadership in Pakistan. This study will bridge this gap in the literature (Amin et al., 2013; Awan et al., 2008; Bodla & Nawaz, 2010; Mir & Abbasi, 2012). The study’s conceptual framework is summarized in the next section.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in the view that leadership is a social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Leaders’ stories can reveal how they make sense

of their leadership identities and their leadership context, and how they manage meaning for themselves and their followers (Reissman, 2008; Weick, 1995). Weick's (1995) model of sensemaking in organizations, rooted in identity formation, i.e., a leader's sense of self; and retrospection; i.e., using past experiences to make sense of the present situation, underscores the importance of leaders' experiences in developing their leadership identities and understanding the context in which their leadership takes place. The stories leaders tell reveal to what extent the system is effective in providing this support and where gaps remain (Birnbaum, 2002). Hence, this study sought to discover the leadership landscape at Pakistan's research universities by exploring narratives of leaders representing varying levels of leadership. The methodology undergirding this study is detailed next.

## **Methodology**

This study was a social-constructivist inquiry into the leadership experiences of leaders at select universities in Pakistan. The assumptions undergirding this study are that both leadership and academic organizations are socially constructed phenomena. Social constructivism is a post-positivistic research paradigm that rejects the positivistic view of reality as something that exists outside of human experience, but rather views phenomena as inseparable from human experience (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

The study utilized narrative methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Reissman, 2008; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) to get rich, thick descriptions from the leaders in the sample. Even though the narrative method has revealed important insights into leadership in other countries (Birnbaum, 2002; Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005), this approach to leadership research is ignored in Pakistan.



Interview data were generated through in-depth qualitative interviews with positional leaders to get a better view of their leadership experiences. A semi-structured interview protocol was created in alignment with the literature on academic leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988, 1989, 1992; Bensimon et al., 1989).

The sample consisted of six positional leaders representing three HEC recognized public co-educational research universities in Islamabad. Two leaders from each university were interviewed for a total of six interviews (60-90 minutes each). Leadership positions represented in the study sample included one Vice-Chancellor/Rector, one Dean, one In-charge Campus, one Department Director, and two Department Heads.

Participant selection was purposive since the aim of the study was to get representation from each of the three target institutions and to get a cross-section of leadership levels at academic institutions. Participants were identified through the respective websites of the institutions and contacted through email. Chain sampling was also employed as interested participants were requested to identify others who may wish to participate. Prospective participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and consent forms via email. Data were triangulated with note-taking, transcripts, member checking, and by multiple researchers (Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

A database of transcripts was created in NVivo qualitative software. Reissman's (2008) thematic analysis methodology was used to code the data. A priori codes were developed from academic leadership literature (Birnbaum, 1988; 1989; 1992) and discussion between the researchers (examples of a priori codes include "definition of leadership," "academic culture," "transformational leadership," and "mentorship"). Emergent codes (such as "unexpected pathways," "family support," "leadership barriers," and "achievements as a leader") were added as the analysis progressed. These emergent codes are very significant as they highlight the unique context of

Pakistani higher education, which is the focus of this study. The narratives were constructed with themes that emerged from the data.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, as with all qualitative inquiries, we are not claiming the generalizability of our findings. Second, despite our best efforts, we could only recruit one female participant for our study since all three universities in our study are co-educational institutions, and women leaders are often found in leadership positions at all-women institutions in Pakistan. The few women who reach leadership positions at co-educational institutions rarely ascend to positions higher than middle management. Lastly, we limited our study to research universities in Islamabad to ensure data manageability and relative consistency of context. Since leadership is highly contextual, the experiences reported in this study may have limited applicability in other contexts.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The narrative analysis surfaced several themes that we discuss and illustrate in this section by outlining our participants' leadership journeys, highlighting the accidental nature of their leadership positions; the mentorship and support they did or did not receive; the most pressing challenges facing Pakistani higher education and suggestions to mitigate these challenges.

### **Accidental Leaders**

All leaders in our sample did not follow a straight path in their leadership journey but became leaders by chance. Some even expressed the opinion that they do not consider themselves as leaders and never aspired to a leadership role. Luck was listed by most participants as one of the factors that enabled them to advance to leadership positions. For example, the leader in the Vice-Chancellor/Rector position shared that he never planned to become an academic leader and entered academia unexpectedly when he received a

scholarship to pursue graduate studies abroad. His father had other plans for him that he did not follow. However, he did not plan his future career in academia and certainly did not plan to ascend to the top leadership position at one of the leading universities in Pakistan. “I think in more cases, people moving into certain positions is often accidental,” he responded when asked if he thought that leaders often choose their path. He illustrated with his own story,

You know what is amazing, I started my career on this campus, lived [number of] years abroad, lived in six different states, never would I have dreamt that I would come back and finish my career at the same campus. But that is what happened.

Similarly, the In-charge campus looked back on his life and recalled, “I never wanted to be what I am right now.” He shared that he had wanted to be a pilot in the Pakistan Air Force but could not realize that dream due to myopia; “that was very devastating for me... I didn’t want to do anything else in life,” he reflected. He never saw himself as an academic and did not aspire to pursue a Ph.D., let alone make a career in academia. He attributed his entry and success in academia to divine intervention: “Allah had other plans for me,” he asserted.

Another participant, a department head, shared that he was a reluctant leader as he wished to focus on his research; however, he was given no choice and was appointed rather than nominated to the department head position. As a junior faculty member, this participant felt that he was coerced into a leadership position that no one wanted because of the massive imbalance between the load of responsibility and the authority vested in the position. He shared,

[This position] is something which everybody tries to avoid. It is a very tough position in the sense that you have a huge administrative load, you are not allowed to work on research as you have neither the time nor the research opportunities. Basically, this is something that does not really help you with

your career, so it is not something that people want. Also, you do not receive any compensation for this added work.

The situation for this participant became so untenable that he had to resign from his post shortly before our interview. In contrast, the other department head in our study entered academia anticipating a leadership role in his future. What he did not expect was being entrusted with the responsibility of the department head soon (a year and a half) after he joined. He recalled,

Even before joining [institution name], I had this in mind that... I would like to serve as HoD for at least two or three years during my tenure and which would most likely start after let's say my three years' stay here. But coincidentally, I was given this opportunity a little ahead of the time, and I thought okay, I can do it now as well.

It is evident from our participants' narratives that none of them grew up dreaming of an academic leadership career but ended up in leadership roles accidentally, even though some of them were not ready, and even unwilling to take on the role. Closely related to the leadership journey of a leader are the help and support, if any, they received, along the way.

### **Mentors and Supporters**

Even though none of the leaders in our study received formal mentoring or leadership training, they shared widely varying experiences of receiving informal mentoring. Some leaders mentioned their parents' significant role in helping them become leaders. The sole female, a Department Director, in our sample, shared how her father countered her mother's resistance and encouraged her to earn her Ph.D. She explained how he played a key role in her leadership journey,

If I talk about the key person, then, my father. When I completed my M.Phil., I wanted to do a Ph.D. But my mother said plainly that there was no need, "Who will marry you [if you get a Ph.D.]?" So, I said I do not want to [get married]. So, my father said, "All right, you do it [Ph.D.]." He pushed me, but for the first time [in my life], my mother did not speak to me for three days.

After marriage, her husband played a critical role in encouraging her to continue her leadership path: “My husband [supported me], after the marriage. A lot of things that we do come at the cost of something else. So, he always encouraged me saying, ‘Don’t worry [Name], I will take care of it.’” Thus, the closest male relations in her life enabled her to become and remain a leader.

The Rector/Vice-Chancellor also attributed his success to his father’s insistence that he and his siblings receive the best education. That early education provided a solid foundation for this leader’s future journey to the corner office of academic leadership. Thus, our findings indicate that family—particularly the father—plays a critical role in the early development of leaders in the patriarchal culture of Pakistan.

Most leaders in our study identified former school and university teachers as their leadership mentors. For example, the In-Charge campus recalled,

My teacher in B.Sc., he was a gem of a person... He turned my life around.... I remember one day after my B.Sc. admission [he said to me], “[Name], you have so much potential. I always feel that you would go far,” and I don’t know how he felt that. I was a horrible student. [He said], “But why you are doing this to your life. You need to turn it around.” So that comment awoke in me this awareness, and I turned my life around because of that. He was always challenging me in the class also... with the result that because of his grooming, I would study, I would read those chapters before I would go into the class.... So, because of the encouragement of a single person, I started thinking that there is more to life...

Similarly, the Dean in our study shared a story from his high school days when a teacher identified leadership potential in him. He recalled that he was a science major in high school, and much to his bewilderment, his teacher suggested that he major in the social sciences. He recollected,

Now in those days, you were expected to study science: you would either be a doctor or an engineer, nothing else was considered a proper career. I was so disappointed at that time... I told my family, and my father was also surprised... He accompanied me to my school to talk to him and asked if I didn’t work hard at my studies if I was dull.... He [the teacher] said, “Nothing of the sort; he is a very intelligent boy. But he has potential; he could be a very good leader. You should have him study the social sciences etc. he has a strong aptitude for that. Science is about formulas, a specific domain, thinking is not

much involved in it” ... at a later stage [in life] I realized that probably he was right...

It is notable that none of the leaders included in the study had experienced institutional mentoring or leadership development in their early years when they were nascent leaders, indicating the need for systematic leadership cultivation through mentoring and training. Challenges that attend academic leadership in Pakistan are addressed next.

### **Major Leadership Challenges**

“If you talk about Pakistan, each and everything is a challenge over here...” asserted the Dean when asked about special leadership challenges in Pakistani higher education. He provided several examples such as the following,

Higher education means knowledge creation. Knowledge creation is not a numbers game, right? When you think of it as a numbers game, by hook or crook people go for the numbers. They don’t go for the quality; they go for the quantity... This is the numbers game brain drain. The biggest brain drain is this that we use our resources here in Pakistan...and publish papers in international journals, magazines, etc. And these are brilliant ideas at times, and these are impact factor papers. My concern is that their materialization is not occurring here.... Our national issues and national requirements are not addressed, and when we do address them then our papers won’t be published because we are far behind the cutting edge... Now what is needed is that we get out of this numbers game and address our national issues, do innovative work, write reports [not just] papers, and bring about reform to improve [the systems] ...

One of the department heads also talked about the numbers game and brain drain – in the conventional sense of the term – as the most persistent challenges Pakistani higher education continues to face. He commented on the numbers game, [HEC] has a policy on faculty promotion ... everyone in Pakistan at faculty position is now considering the number of publications: “I have to make this many publications to be promoted.” And my philosophy is

not based on numbers; I don't believe in numbers. I can give you an example, if you publish in Nature with an impact factor of 28 that's equivalent to let's say your six or seven other publications. It's not an easy job to publish in Nature. On the other hand, you have many impact factor journals which are .25, and that counts, so this is one problem. So, everybody is now looking into completing the 10 publication requirements. They are just focusing on the numbers and then they say, "Whenever I'll get to number 10 and then I'll be promoted, and I'll be an excellent researcher." I don't agree with that.

The same participant also identified brain drain as a persistent challenge, [Brain drain] is still happening, although we are not talking about it anymore but, it is still there. And we are just saying we have so many faculty members, so many PhDs coming back to Pakistan and I think this is not real because I know several faculty members and colleagues who have recently left, and the ones who have gone saying, "Okay, we'll return after one or two years," they haven't come back. So, this problem is still there.

Thus, a focus on numbers rather than quality in research and faculty attrition are identified by leaders as two major issues related to brain drain that plague HEIs in Pakistan.

Some participants listed resistance to change as one of their greatest leadership challenges. They especially stressed the lack of focus on effective teaching as one of their major concerns. One reason for this might be the lack of trained teachers to introduce new teaching strategies (Faize & Nawaz, 2020) For example, the In-Charge campus noted,

So, the world is growing very fast ... and we are not even thinking on these lines how things should be... and that is ... because of ... severe resistance from the faculty... especially the older faculty members ... The young people are more receptive... And I think that has been the most serious challenge that I haven't been able to mold people into thinking about these new paradigms of teaching and learning.

Similarly, the Rector/Vice-Chancellor cited faculty resistance due to financial interest as a leadership challenge. He mentioned his faculty's

propensity to take on a heavier course load for extra income, which he felt compromised their teaching quality as well as research productivity. He explained,

The difficulty is that in many cases, people are resistant to what they think is not in their interest ... we have the lowest teaching load in Pakistan, two courses in a semester ... but there are many faculty who have been teaching third and even fourth courses for extra money. I have put a restriction on that, but that's not a popular restriction ... you know how much an additional course pulls out of you: the energy, the commitment of your time, and then you're simply just too tired to do something else. If you could put that effort and that time into your research, it would be good ... But that has not been widely accepted or even, I would say, there has been opposition to it.

As these leaders highlighted, faculty members appear to believe that there are no rewards for innovative teaching when there is little accountability for poor teachers. Tying promotion and tenure to research production has also proved futile, as faculty prefer to spend research time focusing on earning extra income.

Tenure and promotion were very much on the minds of the leaders on the tenure track in our sample. The middle management leaders such as department heads talked at length about the challenges for tenure track faculty in leadership positions. The HEC tenure track system (TTS) is the prevalent system for promotion in public universities. The HEC has certain rules for TTS appointment and promotion; however, universities have flexibility in enforcing these rules. One department head shared how universities are misusing the TTS faculty in leadership positions to the detriment of the TTS faculty career.

Despite my reservations I was given that [leadership] responsibility and it really did hurt my research because in that initial time you can do research... Immediately after Ph.D., it takes a little while to move away from Ph.D.... and start being an independent researcher. And I was only given that much



time and then I was put into something which I regret... The HEC clearly says that a person on TTS cannot be in a leadership position.

This bending of HEC rules to benefit the universities is coming at the cost of TTS faculty as the promotion criteria remain the same for TTS faculty whether or not they are in leadership positions that prevent them from focusing on research. The pressure to publish is a universal one for faculty at research universities, however, the application of HEC TTS rules has compounded the problem for faculty leaders who feel that the rules are unfair and favor natural and physical sciences. For example, the same department head made this observation,

One big issue in my view is the TTS promotion criteria, especially to associate professor is 10 journal publications. Again, this is very field-specific. In Computer Science we usually go for conferences rather than journals ... in some fields, conferences are nothing, in computer science, they are a big deal, sometimes bigger than journals themselves. So, we have completely sidelined conferences ... again I feel if you are going to have a tenure track system, it should be according to the field.

The other department head concurred that the TTS promotion criteria are unreasonable and discourage junior faculty from taking on leadership roles that would come at the expense of their academic career. He observed, “Everyone who is at the beginning of their career, they say if I want to have a good career if I want to be tenured, I should avoid these kinds of positions.”

The challenges for early-career faculty are compounded when they find themselves in leadership roles as these positions often present an impossible situation for them: if they serve in management positions, they are not rewarded and pay a heavy price as they are unable to publish research, which is the key to tenure. If they refuse these positions, they risk offending supervisors at their HEIs and perhaps an early exit due to insubordination in a deeply hierarchical system.

The only participants who mentioned money as a significant leadership challenge were the Vice-Chancellor/Rector and In-Charge campus. The In-

Charge campus mentioned it in passing, “When you have the money you know, half of your problems go away. But when you don’t have money and you can’t finance your teachers going abroad ... then problems, you know compile and exaggerate and aggravate.” However, the top-level leader in our sample pointed out financial constraints as some of his greatest leadership challenges,

And you know one might say money is not the most important thing for a university, but there are certain basic minimums that you need... here at [Name of University], that is the biggest challenge, and we are working on it to try to get funds from somewhere, but it has not been an easy path. Promises have been made and they have not been honored. So financial resources to improve our infrastructure, will, in turn, lead to better academics (Dahar & Faize, 2011). If you don’t have proper classrooms and don’t have enough space for students, obviously that impacts the quality of our academics.

When asked to identify the greatest challenge Pakistani higher education, in general, is facing, he again returned to financial realities and asserted,

Money! I think that smaller but higher quality ... would be better than this expansion, which I think has led and will lead to not getting the quality that we really should have. As you know, if we are not funded properly, do you expect all these newly emerging institutions [would succeed]? ... You know talk about opening a lot of new universities, might be counterproductive, if you cannot fund them properly, and more importantly, you don’t have the brain power, the faculty, the qualified faculty that is needed.

The fact that only the Vice-Chancellor/Rector and In-Charge Campus mentioned money as an issue highlights the reality that power is concentrated in the top offices and financial matters have more salience for leaders at the top of the leadership hierarchy in Pakistan.

Just as money matters had moresalience for top-level leaders, challenges related to gender had salience only for the sole female leader in our sample. The department director shared several experiences of severe gender discrimination and harassment as a student and a professional. Recalling the

harassment experiences in her early career, she commented “There were a lot of challenges, which are typical for women” as she shared how her supervisor attempted to exploit her ambition to further her career... The workplace harassment faced by this participant highlights the relevance of the global metoo movement in the Pakistani context. The gendered nature of academic leadership helps explain the dearth of female leaders. ... Next, the concluding section offers policy implications based on the findings of this study.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This study explored the narratives of six positional leaders representing three Pakistani research universities. Stories of their leadership journeys and current experiences highlight their sensemaking of their leadership identities and the context within which they work (Reissman, 2008; Weick, 1995). Since Pakistani universities and HEC are aspiring to enter the ranks of global higher education, they would do well to heed the collective wisdom contained in these leaders’ narratives. Some implications and recommendations that emerged from this research follow.

Firstly, through retrospection, the leaders in this study were able to see how they formed their identities as academic leaders (Weick, 1995). Most leaders in our sample did not follow a systematic path to their leadership positions but rather ended up in leader roles accidentally. The development of their self-awareness as leaders was a haphazard journey that depended primarily on chance and support from individuals. This finding points to the need for leadership support, mentoring, and training at early stages even in schools and colleges so as not to miss leadership potential in future leaders and even, indeed, create outstanding leaders both in and outside of academia. Our finding that many leaders receive mentorship from teachers and professors indicates the significance of teachers in cultivating leadership at an early stage. However, the fact that all five men in our sample experienced this mentorship, while the only female did not exemplify deep-seated views of

gender roles that identify men as natural leaders and women as submissive followers. In a conservative, patriarchal country like Pakistan, it is not surprising that leaders need the support of their male relations to succeed in their professional life. We must reiterate that despite our efforts, we were unable to recruit more female participants for our study, mostly because there were hardly any women who were serving in leadership positions at the three research universities we were focusing on; and hence, we make no claim to the generalizability of our findings. However, the scarcity of women leaders underscores the larger problem of a dearth of women academic leaders in large mainstream universities (i.e., not women's institutions). Systematic support is needed for all academic leaders but is particularly crucial for women who are rarely groomed for leadership, which partly contributes to a large gender gap in academic leadership at co-educational institutions. The HEC as well as HEIs must prioritize leadership training and mentoring programs for students and junior faculty, particularly women.

Second, middle-level academic leaders (department heads) highlighted double standards for leaders at this level. They shared that they were forced into leadership roles that did not provide remuneration, and indeed even jeopardized their career by preventing them from pursuing research that would enable them to secure tenure and promotion as per HEC rules. Some institutions are violating HEC rules whereby TTS faculty are not allowed to hold administrative posts, yet TTS faculty are coerced into administrative roles. The HEC and the institutions must create policies for promotion to leadership positions that are transparent and fair. Arbitrary appointments to leadership roles are not in the best interest of the institutions as they do not strengthen the posts but the person who may abuse his or her power. Ideally, all faculty members should serve in leadership positions such as department head/chair on a rotational basis. Since the HEC's TTS system is still in its infancy, the commission must address these issues of transparency and fairness. Additionally, the TTS rules for promotion and tenure favor the pure sciences and do not consider differences among disciplines. The emphasis on

impact factor publications alone for all faculty members is proving to be a major issue as thus far, many faculty members, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, are unable to get the required publications (Faize, 2015), which has led to a dearth of senior faculty at associate and full professor ranks. This numbers game is holding faculty back from doing meaningful work and comes at the cost of their teaching and service (Hoodbhoy, 2020). The major implication of this is lecture-based classrooms devoid of critical and reflective thinking (Faize & Akhtar, 2020). The HEC must reexamine its TTS requirements to ensure its success.

Third, the top-level leader's observation in our research regarding the funding of new universities taking precedence over supporting older public institutions merits attention. The existing public universities cannot continue upholding quality standards if they remain grossly underfunded. These financial problems are related to the public mission of higher education, which is under threat in Pakistan, as it is globally (Marginson, 2011); however, there is little examination of this threat in Pakistani academia. Public universities must be adequately supported so they can further the public mission of higher education and fully contribute to the development of the country.

Finally, the brain drains in academia highlighted by some of our participants is not receiving the attention it deserves. There is a false sense of security regarding PhDs returning to Pakistan after completing their studies abroad. The question is: how many stays? Our participants' stories suggest that many foreign qualified faculty members tend to leave Pakistan after serving out their bond period. The HEC and HEIs need to seriously consider the reasons for this brain drain.

This study was an endeavor to explore the past and present experiences of higher education leaders in the nation's capital. Future research could focus on universities across the country and include diverse institutional types such as private universities, women's universities, and institutions offering vocational and technical education. There is also a need to include more

female leaders at all levels in future research as the gender gap in academic leadership is quite alarming.

The narratives of the leaders in our research reveal important information about the higher education system in Pakistan and how leaders make sense of, and navigate this system. Even though there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of higher education in Pakistan, challenges abound and more needs to be done at institutional and federal levels to support higher education leaders. These individuals play a critical role in steering their institutions, departments, and centers through challenging circumstances and with the support they articulate in this study, they can help Pakistan further its aim to make its mark in the international higher education arena.

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