



Governance and Administrative Challenges in Public Colleges of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

Governance and administrative challenges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Public colleges create barriers to the full flow of educational continuity. This study explores the ground-level governance and administrative challenges facing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges, highlights how university affiliation affects the daily academic and administrative functioning of these institutions, and reports the targeted reforms and policy support that teachers believe are vital to strengthen college governance. This study used a qualitative, open-ended survey. The study collected data through a self-administered Google Form administered to 24 teachers posted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges across settled and post-merger districts at the time of the survey. The study Responses were coded using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The study found that the shortage of resources and poor infrastructure, exacerbated by the concentrated timing of fund disbursement and delayed release, are the principal bottlenecks in operational efficiency: chronic resource and infrastructure shortage, delay generated by dependency on affiliating universities, and a call for greater institutional autonomy paired with digitization and merit-based recruitment. Based on the study findings, it is recommended that an effective reform package entails combining institutional autonomy, merit-based appointments, transparent accountability, and carefully targeted capacity building for impact.

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1. Introduction

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges are not autonomous degree-granting bodies but academically affiliated to a public sector university, which sets curricula, conducts examinations, and issues results. This model dates back to the colonial roots of the earliest affiliating universities in British India established in 1857 as purely examining and supervisory bodies, a structural legacy that persists across South Asian higher education today (Ali, 2023). In this layered structure, a form of dual governance, overlapping administrative and academic authorities produce contradictions that colleges must navigate without clear resolution, (Rauf et al., 2021) argues, as cited in Naseem and Khan (2025). This arrangement has been criticized because most affiliating universities do not apply coherent, discipline-specific criteria to the colleges under their wing, according to (Gilani, 2023).

Although the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has periodically floated plans to disaffiliate colleges from universities altogether and shift degree-granting authority to selected postgraduate colleges, these plans have not been fully realized (Dawn, 2014). A separate regulatory body, the Higher Education Regulatory Authority, governs private colleges' affiliation requirements, adding another layer to an already layered system (Higher Education Regulatory Authority, n.d.). This is a local instance of a governance tension found across South Asian higher education more broadly, where systems inherited a British-era buffer-body model that has since been reformed or abolished in its country of origin but remains largely unchanged in the region (Asian Development Bank, 2021), that how much decision-making authority should sit with the institution closest to the student, how that authority should be balanced against accountability to a central authority, and what happens to an institution's functioning when the two are badly matched.

This study is guided by the following questions;

RQ1: What do teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges identify as the major governance and administrative challenges facing their institutions?

RQ2: How do they describe the effect of the university affiliation system on their college's academic and administrative functioning?

RQ3: What reforms and forms of institutional support do they believe would most improve governance in this context?

2. Literature Review

Asghar and Khan (2024) argue that governance has a significantly positive impact on educational quality while financial resources have a moderating effect on the relationship between governance and quality of education. Rehman et al. (2024) also identify obstacles that hinder BS progress in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Public colleges, such as limited academic autonomy, disparities in affiliation arrangements, inconsistencies in resource allocation and assessment practices, and a lack of research incentives in colleges. Academic autonomy, deemed essential for the sustainability of government colleges. They consider that granting independent control to colleges over curriculum development and student assessment and evaluation would empower them to tailor programs to local needs, enhance teaching and learning experiences, and unlock their full potential for growth and research. According to Asghar and Kasi (2025), sustainable growth and efficient public administration are heavily dependent on good governance, particularly in countries like Pakistan, which faces several obstacles. Hassan (2019). Naseem and Khan (2025), points out India's mode, saying it supports "autonomous college" concept under which certain institutions receive freedom in the field of academic, evaluation, and innovate teaching practices, while remaining affiliated with a university for degree awarding. This improves teaching quality, promotes academic innovation,

and produces a more dynamic college sector, which is a fine example for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Colleges.

2.1 Decentralization and Autonomy in Educational Governance

Decentralization theory, most influentially set out by Fesler, who separated the concept into political, administrative, doctrinal, and dual-role forms (Veliganio et al., 2024). Decentralization is expected to bring efficiency, responsiveness, and innovation as authority is moved closer to the institution. However, the literature warns that these benefits are conditional. Veliganio et al. (2024) found that fiscal flexibility and administrative discretion, comparative analysis of school decentralization policies, were associated with better outcomes when matched by institutional capacity, while unmatched autonomy without capacity tended to open the door to inconsistency and, in some cases, corruption. A study of decentralization in Ghana, African context, Osei and Brock's (2006) concluded that formal decentralization reforms granted schools nominal autonomy, but in practice, teacher and institutional culture continued to operate under older, more centralized norms, producing a gap between the policy on paper and the governance actually experienced day to day.

2.2 New Public Management and the Autonomy-Accountability Pairing

The second theory relevant here is New Public Management (NPM), which promises to replace rule-bound bureaucracy with more flexible, outcome-oriented management (Hood, 1991). NPM's central claim was that public institutions perform better when they are freed from rigid procedural control and instead held accountable for results a claim education systems adopted in a specific policy package known as School Autonomy with Accountability, or SAWA (Bush, 2013; Verger et al., 2024). Verger et al. (2024) recent synthesis of SAWA research across multiple countries argues that accountability and autonomy are not opposites to be traded off against each other, but conditions that each require the other to function properly; holding an institution accountable for outcomes it lacks the authority to influence is, in their words, simply unjust to the institution being evaluated.

The theoretical account of why this mismatch tends to occur draws on principal-agent theory, originally developed to explain conflicts of interest between corporate shareholders and managers (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), and since extended widely into public administration to explain the gap between what central authorities want from an institution and what local administrators are actually equipped to deliver.

2.3 School Autonomy, Accountability, and Their Limits

Autonomy should not be treated as an unqualified good, as the SAWA literature is careful on this point, noting that greater managerial autonomy without a matching level of pedagogical autonomy shows little relationship to institutional performance, and that autonomy granted without adequate support structures can, in some systems, widen rather than close gaps between stronger and weaker institutions (Verger et al. 2024).

2.4 Bureaucratic Culture, Merit, and Civil Service Dysfunction in Pakistan

The International Crisis Group's (2010) report on civil service reform in Pakistan documents recruitment, posting, and promotion governed by personal contacts and political affiliation than merit. It produces an administration that is at once rule-bound in its procedures and unpredictable in its outcomes. Regarding the tribal-area administrative bodies specifically, the report notes that unchecked authority and weak financial oversight make governance failures more likely. Pakistan's civil service culture revolves red tape practices, seniority-based promotion over merit, and frequent, disruptive staff transfers as unresolved problems (The News, 2025).



2.5 Governance and Affiliation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Naseem and Khan (2025) argue that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa colleges remain governed by an unresolved overlap between a colonial-era education code from 1935 and newer university legislation, producing genuine jurisdictional confusion about who has authority over what. Gilani's (2023) commentary makes a parallel point about the affiliation relationship, arguing that most Khyber Pakhtunkhwa colleges' affiliating universities apply no coherent academic criteria to the relationship, leaving colleges teaching across widely different academic levels without a correspondingly flexible degree of institutional autonomy.

2.6 Digital Governance and Administrative Modernization

A smaller but growing literature addresses digitization as a governance reform tool. Reform commentary on Pakistan's civil service has repeatedly proposed real-time e-governance tools as a mechanism for improving monitoring, transparency, and grievance redress in an otherwise paper-bound bureaucracy (Pakistan Today, 2025).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies the interaction of three frameworks. Decentralization theory explains why authority sits where it does and what forms it could plausibly take if redistributed. Principal-agent theory, paired with the NPM-derived autonomy-accountability literature, explains why a mismatched arrangement produces the specific frustration of responsibility without matching authority. The Pakistan-specific civil service literature explains why formal reforms such as merit criteria, digitization, decentralization so often fail to change practice on the ground, since bureaucratic culture and informal incentive structures can outlast any policy document.

4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative, open-ended survey. Data were collected through a self-administered Google Form administered to 24 teachers posted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges across settled and post-merger districts at the time of the survey. Responses were coded using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarisation with the complete dataset, generation of initial codes, searching for candidate themes, reviewing themes against the dataset as a whole, defining and naming final themes, and reporting. Coding was conducted at the semantic level, themes were built from what respondents explicitly stated, keeping the findings close to respondents' own framing. The instrument contained five open-ended items addressing major governance challenges, the effect of the affiliation system, policies requiring reform, the role of resource availability, and recommendations for improvement.

5. Findings

Table. Themes and Frequencies, Governance Items (N = 24)

R1 (Q4-5) and R15 (Q2) have partial non-responses.

Item	Question	Theme	Respondents	Frequency of 24
Q1	Governance challenges	Resource/infrastructure/funding shortage	R1,3,5,8,9,11,13,17, 18,19,21,23,24	13
		Excessive/unequal workload, role-blurring for teachers	R4,10,15,25	4
		Non-transparent, centralized decisions & favoritism	R2,10,14,25	4
		Staffing shortage/transfer	R3,13,22,24	4

Item	Question	Theme	Respondents	Frequency of 24
Q2	Effect of affiliation system	problems		
		Policy inconsistency / "ad hocism"	R16,22,24	3
		Limited institutional autonomy (named explicitly)	R13,24	2
		Delays (exam results/scheduling) from university dependency	R5,6,8,13,18,21	6
		Limited autonomy / rigid rules imposed by university	R9,11,16,25	4
		Positive effect reported	R2(partial),10,17,23	4
		No effect / not applicable	R3,19,24	3
Q3	Policies needing reform	Negative — neglect, poor communication, mistrust	R1,4,14	3
		Digitization of admin/academic processes	R3,6,13,19,21,24	6
		Curriculum/infrastructure/pedagogical reform	R5,9,11,17	4
		Greater decentralization/institutional autonomy	R13,19,22,24	4
		Merit-based appointment & evaluation criteria	R2,20,24,25	4
		Reduce clerical/administrative burden on teachers	R4,14,18	3
		Discipline/admission policy reform	R8,16	2
Q4	Role of resource availability	Resources = central/critical determinant	R5,6,8,9,10,13,17,18,19,21,23	11
		Slow/centralized fund disbursement mechanism	R11,14,25	3
		Resource misuse/misallocation, not just scarcity	R2,15	2
Q5	Recommend	Greater institutional	R8,9,11,13,16,19,21	10



Item	Question	Theme	Respondents	Frequency of 24
	ations	autonomy/decentralization	,22,24,25	
		Increased/timely funding	R8,9,13,14,17,19,23,25	8
		Digitization of governance systems	R2,9,11,13,19,21,24	7
		Leadership/staff training & professional development	R3,13,18,19,21,24,25	7
		Merit-based recruitment/appointment	R4,13,19,20,24,25	6
		Transparency/accountability mechanisms	R2,9,13,19,21,24	6

5.1 Governance Challenges (Q1)

Resource and infrastructure shortage was as a major governance challenge in Q1, as named by 13 respondents (54 percent). Respondents described this as shortage of classrooms and furniture, unmaintained laboratories, absent internet and library facilities, and delayed release of allocated funds. Describing an unequal and blurred distribution of workload, the second cluster of respondents (4) pointed that teaching staff is pulled into clerical or menial duties while administrative roles are filled by favoritism than merit. This theme also overlapped with a third cluster (4) naming non-transparent, centralized decision-making and favoritism directly. As for staffing shortage and unmanaged transfers, four respondents named them separately while a smaller group (3) described governance as suffering from policy inconsistency or, in one respondent's words, simple "adhocism", decisions made case by case with no settled framework behind them.

5.2 Effect of the Affiliation System (Q2)

Responses to this item were mixed, as six respondents linked affiliation to delay like late examinations, late results, and disrupted academic calendars while four described the relationship as imposing rigid rules that colleges have no means to adapt to local circumstances. Contrarily, four respondents reported a positive experience of affiliation, and three reported no effect at all. One response in particular reported greater autonomy, which implies that the affiliation system's effect is not uniform but depends on the particular affiliating institution.

5.3 Policies Requiring Reform (Q3)

Digitization of administrative and academic processes was the most prioritized (6). The respondents pointed to manual attendance systems, paper-based correspondence, and the absence of any centralized digital record-keeping. Curriculum, laboratory, and infrastructure reform followed closely (4), alongside two further themes of greater decentralization or institutional autonomy in decision-making (4), and merit-based criteria in appointment and performance evaluation, replacing seniority-based promotion (4). Three respondents wanted the administrative and clerical burden currently placed on teaching staff to be reduced, and two considered discipline and admission policy as areas needing reform.

5.4 Role of Resource Availability (Q4)

Resource availability is a critical determinant of governance, indicating that scarcity is not just one problem among several, as it received eleven responses (46 percent), but the underlying condition shaping most other governance difficulties. Three respondents in particular referred to the slowness and centralization of the fund disbursement mechanism as the deeper problem, not the absence of resources. Money exists in their account, but reaches colleges too late or through too many layers to be useful. Two respondents described governance problems as originating in misuse or misallocation of resources that were already available.

5.5 Recommendations (Q5)

Recommendations converged strongly around the same handful of priorities visible elsewhere in the data. Ten respondents called for greater institutional autonomy or decentralization of decision-making authority to the college. Eight called for predictably timed funding, seven digitization of governance systems, and seven structured leadership or staff training and professional development. Six called for merit-based recruitment and appointment of principals and clerical staff, and six named transparency or accountability mechanisms as a needed reform.

6. Discussion

The autonomy-resource gap is respondents' lived daily experience, identified by more than half the sample, corroborating Verger et al.'s (2024) a general risk of accountability-without-authority systems. The account of a colonial-era legal framework, as put by Naseem and Khan's (2025), still shapes college governance, which the teachers did not exactly name as the legal architecture producing this system, they did describe symptoms (confusion, delay, inconsistency).

As for the Q5 recommendations, the college teachers consider autonomy paired with accountability, merit-based recruitment, and digitization. Several respondents describe policy as inconsistent or ad hoc even in a system that, on paper, has some devolved elements, which aligns with The Osei and Brock (2006) finding from Ghana, that formal decentralization without a matching shift in institutional culture leaves the old centralized pattern intact underneath a new policy label. Keeping in view the study's Q1 and Q3 findings, respondents' complaints about clerical staff promoted by seniority than competence, and about principals appointed without administrative preparation, are local instances of a documented, national pattern published by The ICG (2010) and recent Pakistani civil service commentary (The News, 2025) which almost mirror the present study.

The uncritical autonomy expansion, as put by the SAWA literature's caution against (Verger et al., 2024), is a useful check. As Autonomy to the resources was insisted but to maintain transparency, accountability was also mentioned to use the former well. Granting colleges more authority without addressing the resource shortage (54 percent) may not yield the desired results. Likewise, a structure without accountability would likely reproduce the same dysfunction in a different form. As for affiliation, it depends on which specific university a college is affiliated with because the matter received mix responses. Not all participants responded negatively, some did report a positive experience. This may mean that any reform recommendation here should avoid treating "affiliation" as negative. Instead, the focus should go to the specific mechanism like examination and results scheduling, which generated the largest share of negative responses.

7. Implications

These challenges can be fixed by granting administrative and financial autonomy to public colleges as well as establishing transparent reporting mechanism. For digitization, core

administrative processes such as attendance, correspondence, fund tracking, and examination coordination needs to be prioritized. The appointments of principals and clerical staff should be based on administrative competence and relevant training than seniority only. The examination and results delay, particularly in the affiliation relationship, be addressed as well as an additional funding toward infrastructure and staffing be directed.

8. Conclusion

The governance issue in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public colleges is a combination of problems ranging from authority and resources to autonomy and accountability to seniority-based promotion to the affiliation relationship with universities. As these challenges have been persistent for a long time, they hamper educational performance. Addressing these issues require sustained policy change such as granting autonomy, ensuring transparency, bringing digitization, implementing competence-based promotion and/or appointment, and improving the affiliation mechanism.

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