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Citation: Muneeb M, Saleem S, Hanif A, Saeed S, Hashmi MSS, Qureshi AA. Challenges in academic governance: Insights from Pakistan's medical colleges. PJMHE. 2023;3(1):30-35.

Corresponding Author Email:
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Funding:
The author(s) received no specific funding for this work.

Conflicts of Interests:
The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Received 22/02/2023

Accepted 12/03/2023

First Published 20/04/2023



Original Article

Challenges in academic governance: Insights from Pakistan's medical colleges

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Abstract

Background: Amidst the evolving landscape of health education, academic governance stands paramount in ensuring the quality and efficacy of institutional practices.

Objective: This study undertook a qualitative exploration, seeking to understand the landscape of academic governance in medical colleges across Pakistan.

Methodology: Through semi-structured interviews with healthcare professionals who have conducted institutional inspections, the research illuminates recurrent challenges and strengths in governance structures.

Results: Key themes emerging from the data underscore the pivotal role of leadership training, strategic alignment, and robust fiscal management in determining institutional success.

Conclusion: The findings highlight a pronounced need for specialized training programs, promoting effective governance and leadership. This paper presents a detailed analysis of these themes, offering recommendations for institutions and suggesting avenues for further research.

Keywords

Academic Governance, Medical Colleges, Health Education, Training.



Introduction

In the complex ecosystem of medical education, academic governance remains paramount in determining an institution's efficacy and quality. At its core, academic governance involves a structured system ensuring educational, research, and service missions align with an institution's objectives¹. This harmonization serves as the backbone of educational delivery, reflecting both the quality of instruction and the institution's societal role.

Across the global spectrum, various challenges punctuate the educational landscape, particularly in the medical realm. From evolving regulatory landscapes to the increasing need for interdisciplinary studies, medical colleges grapple with adapting to a shifting terrain². Within this global context, Pakistan offers a unique perspective. Home to a plethora of medical colleges, both seasoned and nascent, the country embodies challenges seen across developing nations, such as rapid institutional expansion, quality disparities, and balancing traditional teachings with innovative pedagogies³. Such challenges spotlight the essentiality of adept governance, ensuring institutions are adaptable and adherent to standards of excellence.

Historically, the significance of governance in educational institutions was underscored in the works of scholars like Tierney, who postulated that governance served as the underpinning of all educational endeavors⁴. Within the context of Pakistan, the evolution of medical colleges and their governance mechanisms can be traced back to the establishment of the nation's first medical institutions. While the early days were marked by a strong emphasis on curriculum and pedagogical methods, contemporary challenges necessitate a holistic approach encompassing fiscal management, regulatory compliance, strategic foresight, and more⁵.

This research, steeped in the rich history and contemporary challenges of Pakistan's medical educational landscape, seeks to unearth the true quality of academic governance. By tapping into

the insights of healthcare professionals with firsthand experience of institutional evaluations, the study offers a panoramic view of the present and, more importantly, illuminates the path forward. The primary objective of this research is to assess the depth and breadth of academic governance challenges faced by medical institutions, using insights from experienced evaluators.

Methodology

Study Design:

A qualitative research approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of evaluators, capturing nuances often missed in quantitative studies. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool, given their flexibility in exploring complex topics and eliciting comprehensive, candid responses.

Participant Selection:

"Purposive sampling was employed to identify individuals who have served as inspectors for medical and dental colleges on behalf of PMDC/PMC. While these individuals have been actively involved in the evaluation of medical institutions, they are not direct employees or official representatives of PMDC/PMC. This approach was taken to ensure an unbiased perspective by tapping into their rich experiential knowledge, while avoiding potential institutional bias associated with regulatory bodies.

Data Collection:

- **Interview Guide Development:** An interview guide was developed, encompassing open-ended questions structured around the study's objective. This guide was pilot tested on a smaller group to refine the phrasing and sequence of questions.
- **Conducting Interviews:** Interviews, averaging 45 minutes in length, were conducted over the phone, ensuring convenience for participants, and fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue.
- **Recording and Transcription:** With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and

subsequently transcribed verbatim, ensuring data accuracy.

Data Analysis:

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach:

- Familiarization: Initially, transcripts were read and re-read to familiarize researchers with the depth and breadth of responses.
- Coding: A preliminary set of codes was developed, categorizing responses into discernible chunks. This involved both deductive (based on the interview guide) and inductive (emerging from the data) coding.
- Theme Identification: Codes were clustered to identify overarching themes and sub-themes, capturing the essence of participants' perspectives.
- Review and Refinement: Themes and sub-themes were continuously refined, ensuring they adequately represented the data.

- Reporting: Finally, themes were reported with representative quotes, ensuring that the participants' voices remained central to the findings.

Ethical Considerations:

Prior to participation, all interviewees were informed about the study's objectives, methods, and potential implications. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring they were aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and any potentially identifiable information was removed.

Results

During the data analysis phase, four predominant themes emerged, each revealing distinct facets of academic governance.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Feature	Description	
Representation	Medical	75%
	Dental	25%
Gender Distribution	Male	90%
	Female	10%
Professional Role	Administrator	50%
	Educationist	25%
	Basic Medical Scientist	15%
	Clinician	10%

*N=20

Table 2: Primary Themes with Sub-Themes and Key Insights

Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Insights
Leadership Challenges	Training	A recurring sentiment was the gap in formal training for leadership roles. Several participants highlighted the need for a holistic vision that integrates various facets of governance. The ability to adapt to changes, both external and internal, was identified as critical.
	Vision	
	Adaptability	
Financial Management	Strategic Planning	The majority emphasized the importance of forward-looking financial strategies. Efficient allocation of resources, aligned with institutional priorities, was noted as an area often overlooked, leading to potential inefficiencies.
	Resource Allocation	
Compliance		

Regulatory Awareness	Updates	Keeping pace with the dynamic regulatory landscape emerged as a key challenge. The necessity for proactive measures, anticipating future regulatory changes, was emphasized.
	Projections	
Strategic Alignment	Inter-Departmental Coordination	A consistent vision across all departments was identified as essential for cohesive functioning. Participants highlighted instances of inter-departmental conflicts resulting from misaligned objectives.
	Vision Alignment	

Overview of primary themes and corresponding sub-themes identified from the semi-structured interviews with evaluators regarding academic governance challenges in medical institutions.

Textual description of results with representative quotes:

Leadership Challenges:

- Training: "Often, individuals ascend to leadership roles based on seniority or academic prowess, not necessarily on administrative acumen or governance training."
- Vision: "The vision of an institution needs to be clear, concise, and communicated effectively across all levels for successful governance."
- Adaptability: "In an ever-evolving academic landscape, rigidity can be an institution's downfall. Adapting to both anticipated and unforeseen changes is crucial."

Financial Management:

- Strategic Planning: "Institutions sometimes become reactive, addressing financial challenges as they arise. A proactive, strategic approach to finances can preempt many issues."
- Resource Allocation: "It's not just about having funds but allocating them where they are most impactful. Misallocation can lead to resource wastage."

Regulatory Awareness:

- Compliance: "Staying compliant is not just about ticking boxes. It's about understanding the spirit of the regulations and integrating them into institutional practices."

- Updates: "The frequency with which regulations change can be overwhelming. Institutions must have mechanisms to stay updated."
- Projections: "Anticipating where regulatory frameworks might head in the future can give institutions an advantage."

Strategic Alignment:

- Inter-departmental Coordination: "Silos within institutions can be detrimental. Inter-departmental collaboration and communication are key."
- Vision Alignment: "Every department, irrespective of its function, should align with the institution's overarching vision."

Discussion

The results from our qualitative analysis elucidate several insights into the intricacies of academic governance within medical institutions in Pakistan. These insights, captured under four main themes, reflect the challenges faced by leaders in the ever-evolving landscape of medical education.

1. Leadership Challenges

Perhaps one of the most telling findings of this research is the perceived gap in formal training for leadership roles in academic institutions. The quote, "Often, individuals ascend to leadership roles based on seniority or academic prowess, not necessarily on administrative acumen or governance training," underscores the importance of proper training for individuals assuming positions of leadership⁶. Effective leadership goes beyond academic achievements; it necessitates an understanding of governance and administrative functions. This aligns with prior studies indicating

that effective leadership in academic settings often hinges on a balance of administrative expertise and academic excellence⁷.

The theme of adaptability highlighted the need for institutions to be resilient and responsive to both internal and external changes. As aptly summarized by one participant, "In an ever-evolving academic landscape, rigidity can be an institution's downfall." This sentiment mirrors the findings from other studies which suggest that adaptability is a cornerstone of effective academic governance, especially in a rapidly shifting educational ecosystem⁸.

2. Financial Management

The emphasis participants placed on forward-looking financial strategies resonates with the broader discourse on academic governance. A participant's observation that "Institutions sometimes become reactive, addressing financial challenges as they arise" is telling of the reactive approach some institutions may adopt, which can lead to inefficiencies. Strategic financial planning is a proactive approach that can help preempt potential challenges⁹. Furthermore, the efficient allocation of resources is pivotal to ensure the financial health and sustainability of academic institutions¹⁰.

3. Regulatory Awareness

Regulatory awareness emerged as a critical component of academic governance. This finding is in line with global trends, wherein regulatory compliance is an ongoing challenge for academic institutions¹¹. Notably, our participants emphasized the importance of not just being compliant but understanding the essence of regulations. This proactive approach to compliance ensures that institutions are not just adhering to regulations in letter but also in spirit, a sentiment echoed in recent literature¹².

4. Strategic Alignment

Our study highlighted the significance of strategic alignment across departments within academic institutions. The issue of inter-departmental conflicts due to misaligned objectives is not unique to the Pakistani context. Such conflicts can arise when departments operate in silos, emphasizing

the need for effective inter-departmental communication and collaboration¹³. Vision alignment, as one participant noted, is essential, suggesting that every department, regardless of its primary function, should operate in tandem with the institution's overarching goals and objectives¹⁴.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the quality of academic governance in medical institutions across Pakistan:

1. **Leadership Training Initiatives:** Given the highlighted gap in formal leadership training, it is essential for medical institutions to introduce and endorse specialized training programs for their prospective and current leaders. These programs should integrate principles of governance, fiscal management, and strategic alignment to ensure leaders possess both the academic and administrative acumen required for effective leadership.
2. **Proactive Financial Strategies:** Institutions should emphasize proactive financial planning, fostering a culture where resource allocation is systematically aligned with institutional priorities. Regular financial reviews, aided by external consultancy where needed, can further ensure financial health and sustainability.
3. **Regulatory Update Mechanisms:** Given the dynamic nature of the regulatory landscape, institutions should establish dedicated teams or departments responsible for staying abreast of regulatory changes. This will not only ensure compliance but also facilitate the anticipation of future shifts in the regulatory environment.

While this research provides valuable insights into the state of academic governance in medical institutions across Pakistan, despite efforts to select unbiased participants, the study's reliance on professionals who have conducted institutional

evaluations might introduce a certain level of inherent bias based on their professional experiences and perspectives.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and nuances of academic governance in medical institutions in Pakistan. The insights gained underscore the importance of leadership training, financial strategy, regulatory awareness, and strategic alignment in fostering a conducive environment for academic excellence. Addressing these challenges is paramount for institutions aiming to navigate the multifaceted world of medical education governance effectively.

Conflicts of Interest

The corresponding author declares a potential conflict of interest as they are currently running a course on academic governance. However, utmost care has been taken to ensure that the research findings and interpretations remain impartial and unbiased. The research was conducted objectively, and the data presented is genuine and unaltered.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge all the female physicians for their time and contribution to the study.

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