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## **Negotiating Autonomy: A Multiple Case Study of Teacher-Led Curriculum Innovation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Public Universities**

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### **Abstract**

This multiple case study investigates the lived experiences of fourteen faculty members engaged in teacher-led curriculum innovation across three public universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Framed within a socio-cultural perspective on teacher autonomy, the research examines how academic staff negotiate institutional constraints, cultural expectations, and resource limitations while initiating bottom-up curricular reforms. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and participant observation over six months. Findings reveal a complex interplay between individual agency and structural impediments, where innovation occurs through micro-political negotiations, collegial solidarity, and strategic compliance. Teachers exercise discretionary autonomy primarily in pedagogical implementation rather than design, navigating bureaucratic centralisation and assessment regimes through informal networks. The study identifies three distinct negotiation strategies: adaptive assimilation, collaborative resistance, and strategic subversion. Implications underscore the need for policy frameworks that recognise teacher professionalism and create enabling structures for context-responsive curriculum development in Pakistan's higher education sector.

**Keywords:** Teacher autonomy, curriculum innovation, higher education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, public universities, case study

### **Introduction**

Since the formation of Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, the Pakistani higher education scene is going through a seismic change as the public universities in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province are on a rampage of unprecedented growth. The province also experienced a 300 per cent growth in institutional capacity within the period between 2002 and 2022 through the creation of twenty-two new universities of the public sector (HEC, 2022). This numerical advancement, nevertheless, has ushered in the qualitative dilemmas in



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relation to academic excellence, governmental frameworks and curriculum applicability. In this setting, the issue of teacher autonomy in curriculum issues has become a hot spot on which state centralisation, institutional bureaucracy and academic professionalism meet in intricate factors.

Reforms in curriculum authority to university level which were required by the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment of 2010 had the theoretical effect of providing greater discretion in academic decision making by faculty. However, there is empirical evidence to indicate that there is a continuous gap between policy rhetoric and institutional practice. In terms of its hierarchy, public universities are defined by top-down lines of curriculum development that are not usually related to classroom realities and student demands (Ashraf and Raza, 2021; Khan, 2020). This paper fills this gap by looking at the role of teachers in the exercise of agency within a limited setting to create a meaningful curricular change.

### **The Productive Use of Teacher Initiatives in Limited Situations**

International scholarship has come to realise that teachers have become a central player in curriculum which no longer views them as an implementer. The theory of teacher-led innovation, based on the writings of Stenhouse (1975) and Darling-Hammond (2006), predicts the use of practitioner knowledge, responsiveness to context, and professional judgment when developing a curriculum. Most of this literature is, however, based on Western democracies in which the institutional structure provides more professional autonomy. The reality of the public universities in Pakistan is quite different: the formalized syllabuses, textbooks and fixed assessment systems, and scarce resources.

The first impression survey conducted in three universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including University of Peshawar, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, and University of Swat demonstrated a paradox. Although the official policy gave the curriculum committees formal powers, the real innovation was often initiated by personal faculty members or small groups of colleagues working at the periphery of the institutions. However, these teachers added additional resources, reorganized assessment plans, incorporated local knowledge systems and used alternative pedagogies even though the system was resistant. Their cases shed some light on the micro-politics of curriculum negotiation in a situation where formal autonomy is still mostly formal.

### **Background and purpose of the research**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa offers a unique research location where researcher needs to study teacher autonomy. The geopolitical location, linguistic diversity, and the history of education of the province form peculiar curricular tensions. Closeness to Afghanistan has brought curricular demands on the subject of security and on the regional language, and the ethos of the Pashtun culture focuses on group decision-making rather than personal enterprise. Besides, the state-province university system has a higher proportion of students in the public universities who are first-generation and rural in nature and although there are standardized curricula that might be used, they require pedagogical modifications of a type few other standardized programs would admit.

The available literature on Pakistani studies is mostly concentrated on macro-levels of curriculum policy (Khalid, 2018; Perveen, 2019) or analyzed the



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implemented curriculum by student outcomes (Akhtar et al., 2020). Very little research has been conducted on how teachers negotiate autonomy in practice. The study meets this gap by giving precedence to teachers in the study and reporting on the means by which curriculum innovation takes place in spite of structural inhibition.

### **Significance of the Study**

The importance of this inquiry stretches on theoretical, practical and policy levels. Theoretically, it supplies the deficient literature on teacher autonomy in post-colonial educational systems where the institutional cultures mirror bureaucratic-academic model of hybridism. The research advances conceptual perspectives of agency expression in limited professional environments by presenting the documentation of negotiation strategies.

In practice, the research provides implications that will be useful in terms of faculty development programmes, especially related to the mentoring of early-career academics in curriculum leadership. The Pakistani Universities invest a lot of money in training faculty yet pay little attention to the political aspects involved in curriculum work. The study forms the basis of research attire on the creation of professional learning communities that promote risk-taking and innovation.

Policymaking wise, the research directly addresses the ongoing policy reforms in HEC. The National Curriculum Review Framework of 2023 is focused on decentralisation and institutional autonomy but the operating rules are not clear. The presence of successful teacher-led innovations, coupled with the study of systemic barriers can be used to guide policy implementation strategies that would allow balancing the quality assurance with professional discretion.

### **Research Objectives**

The study pursued three primary objectives:

1. To examine the nature and extent of teacher autonomy in curriculum innovation within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's public universities
2. To identify strategies employed by faculty members to negotiate institutional constraints while initiating curricular changes
3. To analyse how contextual factors including institutional culture, resource availability, and policy frameworks enable or inhibit teacher-led innovation

### **Research Questions**

The research addressed the following central questions:

1. How do university teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa conceptualise and exercise autonomy in curriculum innovation?
2. What negotiation strategies do faculty members deploy when encountering institutional resistance to curricular changes?
3. How do institutional structures, cultural contexts, and policy frameworks shape the possibilities for teacher-led curriculum innovation?
4. What enabling conditions support sustainable curriculum innovation led by teachers in public universities?

### **Literature Review**

The idea of autonomy of teachers has been undergoing many changes since the



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days when Stenhouse (1975) initially contracted to promote the idea of a teacher as a researcher and as a curriculum developer. ES initial definitions focused on the freedom of an individual not to be under the control of other people, and placed autonomy as a binary concept of constraint and liberation. Nevertheless, modern research redefines autonomy as socially contingent, relational, and socially situational based on professional judgment being constituted by institutional framework (Priestley et al., 2015). Such an ecological approach acknowledges that the agency of teachers is a result of mutual interactions between personal quality, cultural settings, and material circumstances and not an innate quality of professionalism.

In his argument, Kelly (2009) differentiates between curriculum as a planned text and curriculum as lived experience by saying that teachers mediate between official prescriptions and the lived experience by offering professional interpretation and contextual adaptation. The discretionary autonomy is necessary in this mediation - the ability to make informed choices in each of the areas of content, pedagogy and assessment in regards to student needs and professional knowledge. Darling-Hammond (2006) indicates that this autonomy is positively correlated with the quality of instruction in the cases when the cultures of collaboration and professional development are well established. On the other hand, Ball (2003) cautions that the performative accountability regimes will pervert teacher professionalism into a strategic compliance whereby teachers do not perform policy textually but substantially.

The results of international studies indicate that there are different patterns of curriculum agency in systems of education. In Scandinavian settings, the teachers enjoy a high degree of design autonomy offered in trust-based professional cultures (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Chinese universities have controlled autonomy, where innovation will be made inside centrally outlined parameters (Zhang & Charalambous, 2016). The South African case studies demonstrate the way the teachers negotiate post-apartheid curriculum changes with the use of collective action and micro-political strategies (McGhee and Shay, 2019). All these studies emphasize to show that the autonomy is never absolute but it is always negotiated in terms of structural constraints and cultural norms. Through innovation, Higher Education Curriculum will be advanced.

Curriculum innovation at the university level offers different challenges to reform in schools. Van den Akker (2003) gives curriculum design as consisting of several layers such as ideal, formal, perceived, operational, and experiential with slippage at any point between the levels being unavoidable. This slide is exacerbated in tertiary education by disciplinary specialisation, research-teaching frictions and changes in the expectations of stakeholders. According to Fullan (2007), sustainable educational change needs to be addressed at the same time in terms of moral purpose, capacity building, and systemic support systems. In the case of curriculum innovation, this implies that teacher initiative be consistent with institutional vision and resource allocation.

Giroux (1988) puts teachers in the role of intellectuals who need to actively construct the knowledge of the curriculum instead of transmitting the knowledge that has been authorised. This vision of transformation reflects with the Pakistani academicians who are interested in the decolonisation of curricula and integration of native knowledge systems. But even institutional forms tend to reproduce what Freire has called banking education in which curriculum is a



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more or less static deposit of knowledge. The conflict between revolutionary desires and procreative facts defines the life of a great number of university professors.

### **Pakistani Higher Education Situation**

The university system in Pakistan is a development of colonial precedents where bureaucratic dominance over academic freedom was being enforced. Perveen (2019) follows the progression of curriculum development that was still centralised under the University Grants Commission until the establishment of HEC, which in theory would decentralise the power, yet maintain quality assurance, mechanisms that limit innovation. In his survey of 200 Pakistani university teachers, Khalid (2018) has discovered that 78 per cent of the respondents have low engagement in the design of the curriculum, although they participate in curriculum committees in a formal manner. The cause of this lack of participation is various; the time limitation, institutional ignorance, and the bureaucracy that favors administrative conformity over academic content.

Studying the impact of National Curriculum Templates developed by HEC, Ashraf and Raza (2021) conclude that though the templates guarantee standardisation, they inevitably promote discouragement of the context-responsiveness to adaptation. The teachers feel that these templates are prescriptive tools instead of loose frameworks and so they are known as rubricated teaching whereby creativity is compromised in favor of conformity. The article by Khan (2020) focuses on the governance system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and demonstrates that the provincial, institutional, and departmental authorities impose layers of authority that blur the jurisdiction of the curriculum. Such multi-level governance has a tendency to be conservative to a fault, since waiting to have approvals is a slow way of slowing down innovation.

### **Structures and Mechanisms in the Institutions**

Rehman (2016) reports the bureaucratization of rationality within Pakistani university administration, where the decision-making process in academics is also biased towards documents at the expense of deliberation. The curriculum modification has to pass through several committees such as departmental, faculty, academic council and senate, which have different priorities and time schedules. Nazir and Bibi (2020) discover that the early-career academics are the ones that are most disadvantaged in this labyrinthine process because they do not have social capital to circumvent the institutional politics.

Another important limitation is assessment regimes. According to Akhtar et al. (2020), semester systems required by HEC and characterized by a specific pattern of examinations suppress the ability of teachers to assess students in a creative way. Pedagogical flexibility is equally curtailed by the use of standardised grading rubrics and external examiner systems that are aimed at creating fairness. According to Ali and Ahmad (2019), quality assurance, though essential, has led to the establishment of a culture of audit in relation to curriculum innovation, which is perceived as a dangerous deviation instead of professional duty.

Structural constraints are enhanced by resource constraints. According to Saeed (2017), the universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are funded 40 per cent lower than the national figures, which impacts library purchases, digital infrastructure, and opportunities to develop as a professional. This is especially



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true of those disciplines that demand on-the-job learning or up-to-date material. Jan and Khan (2018) explain that the language politics make curriculum work even more complicated, as English-medium instruction is required on a provincial level, and students have different levels of proficiency, which compels teachers to make unapproved pedagogic adjustments.

### **Dimensions of Professional Autonomy in the Culture**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has certain dynamics that come in with the culture of the region. The principles of Pashtunwali that stress the use of collective agreement (jirga) and respect to the elders also shape the academic decision-making patterns. Junior faculty tend to wait until the senior colleagues take the initiative instead of coming up with proposals on their own. On the other hand, risk-takers may be safeguarded by the tribal values of nanawatai (sanctuary) in case they win the patronage of respected mentors. Such cultural conventions overlap with Islamic education culture which venerates textual and teacher fidelity and negotiates through knotty relationships of tradition and modernity.

According to Singh and Sharma (2020), post-colonial educational systems are characterized by unique patterns of autonomy in which teachers are both opposed and uphold colonial hierarchies. The Pakistani scholars criticize the western dominance in epistemology but use western publications as a means of promotion which forms what they refer to as dependent autonomy. The paradox has an influence on the choice of curriculum especially with regard to theoretical orientation and methodology.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research is an ecological approach to teacher agency that integrates the socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky, community of practice by Lave and Wenger, and current agency research. The idea of the mediated action by Vygotsky (1978) offers some background understanding, and it suggests that human activity is never understood without the help of cultural tools, rules, and relations within the community. This, when applied to curriculum innovation, implies that teacher autonomy is never an individual property but is produced in the relationships with institutional artefacts (templates of syllabuses, templates of assessments), discourse of the profession (HEC guidelines, profession-specific norms), and peer relations.

The situated learning theory of Lave and Wenger (1991) builds upon this analysis by the conceptualisation of professional identity as a result of legitimate peripheral engagement in communities of practice. Learning curriculum politics takes place by observation and enabled participation in curriculum politics, whereby over time junior academics acquire larger roles as they learn the codes of the institution. This point of view is the reason why we often find the phenomenon of innovation focusing on specific departments or mentor-protégé dyads, when the newcomers are supported in gaining confidence and can participate in curriculum change activities through scaffolding.

Biesta et al. (2015) provide an ecological model in which agency is realized and not owned, based on the quality of professional relationships, material goods and cultural acknowledgments. This model differentiates agency as capacity and agency as achievement, the first as potential, and the latter as actualised by strategic action. This difference sheds some light on why a majority of Pakistani



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teachers have curriculum knowledge (capacity) and cannot introduce innovations (achievement) because of unfavorable ecologies.

The theoretical synthesis has made teacher-led curriculum innovation in the form of a dialectical process in which individual efforts meet with structural restriction, which produces negotiation tactics that both recreate and change institutional formations. Teacher autonomy is estimated as a spectrum of discretionary spaces between pedagogic implementation to formal design where innovation is practised in the micro-political spaces, collegial solidarity and strategic compliance. This framework puts more emphasis on process than outcome, where the focus is put on how teachers bargain instead of measuring autonomy.

### **Methodology**

A multiple case study approach was employed in this study (Stake, 2006) as a way of examining teacher-led curriculum innovation in various institutions. It was designed in a manner that is appropriate to investigate real-life phenomena with ambiguous boundaries (Yin, 2018), and concentrated on three universities with different institutional histories, mechanisms of resources, and settings of culture: University of Peshawar (since 1950), Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (since 2009), and University of Swat (since 2010). This was done through purposive sampling of 14 members of the faculty as there was diversity (gender, rank, discipline and experience in innovation). There were six associate professors, five assistant professors and three lecturers. The data were collected mostly by means of semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes), where the themes of autonomy, processes of innovation, and supporting or restraining contextual influences were investigated. Triangulation was also done through the use of documentary evidence (curriculum proposals, meeting minutes, HEC guidelines, and statutes) and participant observation of meetings and workshops. The data of the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the iterative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the codes that were employed regarding the autonomy, strategies of innovation and constraints factors were grouped and divided into micro-political navigation, collegial solidarity, and strategic compliance. The cross-case analysis revealed the differences in patterns across institutions, disciplines, and career stages, and the pattern variation was supported by member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description to guarantee the trustworthiness. Systematic coding and retrieval were done using NVivo 12.

### **Analysis and Results**

#### **The Enacted Curriculum Innovation**

The fourteen interviewees described experiences of initiating curriculum innovations, which differed in scale and content, but were uniform in terms of negotiating and constraining. Their accounts showed that teacher autonomy around curriculum affairs takes the form of a continuum and not a quality and that innovation is found mainly within pedagogical practice and not in formal centering. The data revealed three specific negotiation strategies, which included: adaptive assimilation, collaborative resistance and strategic subversion. All these strategies, either separately or in combination, allowed teachers discretionary autonomy within the limiting structures and manoeuvre about institutional

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micro-politics by means of collegial solidarity.



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## **The Autonomy Continuum: Implementation vs. Design**

The participants always differentiated between curriculum design autonomy, which is the power to define what should be taught, what should be achieved at the end, and how standards can be assessed, and pedagogic autonomy, the ability to interpret and implement the suggested curricula in the form of a teaching process, supplemental materials, and classroom assessment. All the fourteen teachers stated that they portrayed little autonomy in design, and curriculum committees were more of a show and tell house of ratification of HEC templates than of inventing alternatives unique to the context. According to an associate professor of University of Peshawar, Dr Farhan, it works like this:

The curriculum committee is composed of two meetings in a year. We deliberate on the recent instructions of HEC, approve of recommendations made by other departments and make sure that our syllabi conform to the template set by HEC. Authentic innovation will follow, when I get behind the door of my classroom and determine how I am going to really teach what the document specifies. This tendency of the documentary compliance and operational innovation appeared in all cases. The most used autonomy was the unauthorised supplementation as teachers incorporated local case studies, indigenous knowledge and current issues within the prescribed frameworks. Dr Ayesha, a lecturer in Education at Abdul Wali Khan University, recounted redesigning assessments in the framework of the semester system at HEC:

The template will have two assignments, a presentation, and a final exam. This structure is out of my control but I do determine the assignment topics - students will study local school management practices through the critical theory that is not on the official syllabus. It maintains the shape, but its content varies.

This pedagogic autonomy was still on a case-by-case basis depending upon the leniency of department heads and the discretion of students. Seven respondents had experiences of their innovations being scrutinized by outside examiners or quality control reviewers, and had to do justificatory work that strengthened compliance pressures.

## **Strategic Approach to Negotiation One: Adaptive Assimilation**

The five participants, mostly junior faculty, used adaptive assimilation, or strategically aligning the innovations with institutional priorities in order to attain legitimacy and also pursue substantive change. This strategy entailed the presentation of curriculum changes as a reaction to HEC quality assurance standards or school strategic plan. Dr Imran is an assistant professor at University of Swat, who narrated about the implementation of community-based learning modules:

I was aware that the concept will be met with resistance and hence I directly associated it with the priority of the Vice-Chancellor community engagement. I have applied official language, completed the necessary forms carefully and made it appear to meet the institutional goals. It is a radical innovation, the students collaborate with local artisans in order to capture the traditional knowledge, yet the packaging is bureaucratically reasonable.

Effective assimilation demanded complex 'translation work' of transforming new practices into institutional discourse. The participants recognized the following major translation mechanisms: the use of HEC keywords, reflecting on the innovations in the form of best practices that could be



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documented and presented to accreditation, and finding the approval of senior colleagues. Nevertheless, this policy jeopardized co-option, in which radical possibility was watered down to gain consent.

### **Negotiation Strategy Two: Collaborative Resistance**

Six respondents, mostly mid-career scholars who had some departmental leverage, participated in collaborative resistance, or group action to confront limiting policies without necessarily challenging them. This approach took the form of consensus-building within the departments to change assessment policies, mutual rejection of non-realistic HEC directives, or by parallel curriculum creation, which was taught informally alongside the official ones. Literature syllabus Peshawar University English Department faculty unanimously restructured their literature syllabus to incorporate the translations of Pashto poetries although HEC is Anglophone:

As a department, we had come to an agreement that we had to have local content in our students. We put the standard syllabus to pass but instructed our modified one. When outside examiners questioned the content of the exam papers we presented both versions to them and claimed that the innovations were a form of pedagogic enrichment. The united front ensured that administration was hard pressed to punish people.

The communities of practice between the departments were sources of collaborative resistance in which shared professional values overcame institutional conservatism. Nonetheless, this policy demanded a lot of social capital and could easily get disintegrated when key actors backed out. The participants reported successful resistance was based on formation of what Wenger defined as regimes of competence that legitimised other practices within an organisation and generated a strong force to counter external challenges. Strategic Subversion: This is a negotiating strategy that involves the negotiator making strategic choices about the negotiation process and its outcomes.

Negotiation Strategy Three: Strategic Subversion. Three interviewees, who were senior professors with long-standing reputations, used strategic subversion, i.e. speaking out against restrictive structures by a public statement, referring to HEC, or refusing to enforce measures that were considered unsound in terms of education. I sent an email to HEC Quality Assurance Division claiming the use of rubrics contravenes the principles of assessment validity. I duplicated the Vice-Chancellor and vowed to take the press. One day my department was given special dispensation to fly other assessment models. In some cases, it is only by acting hard that one is listened to.

Subversion was highly professional. The actions of the associate professor led to a long-standing dispute with the university administration, as they had to be prevented from being punished by using professional associations. The respondents regarded subversion as a final solution, which could only be maintained by the holders of safe posts, who had external contacts as well as the readiness to accept professional loneliness. However, effective subversion made precedents that helpful to the colleagues, creating room to further innovations.

### **Co-worker Solidarity and Micro-Political Managing**

It was basically on collegial solidarity that all strategies relied. Participants



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reported informal mentorship relationships in which senior staff members mentored new hires about how to navigate an institution, shared effective templates of innovation and offered protective coverage. Dr Bilal, a lecturer at University of Swat underlined the importance of his mentor:

Dr Sahab informed me about the committee meetings that are significant, whose endorsement is formal and not substantive and how to formulate propositions. He came to my initial curriculum presentation, to give an indication of departmental assistance. Having no such support, I should have resorted to safe conformity.

Micro-political navigation entailed mapping of institutional power structures, key decision-makers as well as the development of strategic alliances. The educators differentiated between paper tigers (committees that had titles) and real power brokers (Deans and external examiners and nominees of HEC). Effective innovators took time to build relationships, go to social events, provide administrative favours, and being submissive to the seniors in front of others as they sought concessions under the carpet.

### **Institutional Differences and Contextually Differentiated**

The comparative analysis showed that there were major differences among the three universities. The oldest and University of Peshawar had highly established bureaucratic practices, but also informal customs of academic freedom, where innovative faculty had been safeguarded. It was so large and complex that it had created administrative blind spots where innovation could thrive without being noticed. On the contrary, the newer universities were more flexible in their formal organization but were heavily monitored to gain HEC recognition thus limiting innovation. All these institutional differences are summarised in Table One.

**Table 1: Negotiation Strategies Employed by Faculty Members for Curriculum Innovation**

Strategy	Description	Typical Tactics	Risk Level	Success Factors
Adaptive Assimilation	Aligning innovations with institutional priorities to gain legitimacy	Using HEC keywords; linking to strategic plans; senior endorsement	Low to moderate	Bureaucratic fluency; political timing; documented alignment
Collaborative Resistance	Collective action to modify constraining policies through departmental consensus	Parallel curricula; joint non-implementation; collective justification	Moderate to high	Departmental cohesion; mentor presence; external professional networks
Strategic Subversion	Direct challenge to constraining structures	Media engagement; formal appeals; refusal of	Very high	Seniority; external reputation; willingness to



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through public compliance	accept isolation
critique or	
formal	
complaint	

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## Discussion

The results provide a strong rationale to an ecological conceptualisation of teacher agency as they prove that autonomy is not granted by institutions but gained via negotiation strategies. The three strategies that are identified (adaptive assimilation, collaborative resistance, and strategic subversion) are different responses to the achievement of agency in constraining ecologies as described by Biesta et al. (2015). Instead of perceiving constraints as the inhibitors, educators take active interpretive stances, adopt, and refocus structural requirements in the creation of discretionary spaces. This dialectic process on the other hand replicates the institutional structures (via strategic compliance) and at the same time it reshapes them (via cumulative innovations that disrupt the norms).

The identified autonomy continuum in analysis is the continuum that goes beyond the levels of the curriculum proposed by Kelly (2009) and differentiates design authority and pedagogic discretion. The level of agency among the Pakistani public university teachers is high at both operational and experiential curriculum levels with little agency in ideal and formal levels. Such a divide mirrors the colonial traditions of education in which local teacher trainees presented metropolitan education without taking part in its design, which Singh and Sharma (2020) call a characteristic feature of the post-colonial system. The value of the study is that it records how teachers can use the narrowing positionality to create areas of innovation using interpretive professionalism.

## South Asian Specificities and Comparative Perspectives

There are diverse points of reference to these dynamics in international literature. Scandinavian literature (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) shows how trust based cultures provide room to design freedom, which is very different to Pakistan audit culture where suspicion arises and defensive documentation is required. There are comparable tendencies of controlled autonomy, according to Chinese studies (Zhang & Charalambous, 2016), but a state control in Pakistan is not as open, but it is implemented through a chain of bureaucratic levels, which introduces uncertainty, rather than certainty. The South African scholarship (McGhee & Shay, 2019) is very close to the Pakistani experiences, especially the ways communities of practice to create other regimes of competence that pose alternative to official standards.

The peculiarities of the situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa present the cultural aspects which are not often discussed in the Western literature. The Pashtunwali concept of mashwara (consultation) influenced the way teachers developed collegial agreement, and nanawatai (sanctuary) relationships implied that the innovations could only enjoy protection when they were related to the respected elders. These cultural practices overlap with Islamic traditions of education that prioritize the authority of teachers, which form hybrid systems of accountability. They were not just trying to negotiate through institutional bureaucracy, but also through the demands of the community about what kinds



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of knowledge and what can be considered respectable behaviour a challenge that Western models of agency do not take into account.

**Table 2: Comparative Institutional Contexts Shaping Teacher Autonomy**

Feature	University of Peshawar	of Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan	University of Swat
Institutional Age	Established 1950; mature bureaucracy	Established 2009; emerging structures	Established 2010; developmental phase
Autonomy Culture	Embedded traditions of academic freedom; administrative blind spots	Intense surveillance; informal channels	HEC flexible involvement; resource scarcity
Innovation Pattern	Individual initiatives in established departments	Departmental clusters around research centres	Mentor-protégé dyads; junior faculty caution
Primary Constraint	Bureaucratic inertia and procedural complexity	Quality assurance compliance pressures	Funding limitations and infrastructure deficits
Enabling Factor	Informal senior protection networks	Interdisciplinary collaboration spaces	Strong community-university partnerships

**Implications to policy and institutional Reform**

The results have great implications to curriculum reform in HEC. The focus on institutional autonomy in the 2023 National Curriculum Review Framework is superficial without dealing with micro-political organization which limits teacher agency. Policy should realise that autonomy does not just exist in formal delegation but it also demands capacity building in negotiation strategies, mentoring systems that pass on institutional knowledge, and risk-taker protection mechanisms. HEC might positively change the prescriptive templates to outcome frameworks, which outline graduate competencies but leave the option of the route to the institutions.

In the university level, the administration should recognize the fact that innovation often arises informally and should develop systems through which they can identify, nurture and provide growth to such projects. The existing quality assurance mechanisms handle unauthorised innovation as deviance; rather they ought to include the aspect of teacher-led innovation as manifestation of professional dedication. The creation of so-called innovation incubators where teachers experiment with new changes in their curriculum with the support of the institution and mentorship might help to turn one-time efforts into organizational change. In addition, criteria of promotion must also reward curriculum leadership as well as the research output in order to encourage the time consuming task of negotiation and implementation.



## **Limitations and Scope**

The limitations of the study should be mentioned. Although the small sample is suitable in in-depth case study, the scope of generalisability is restricted to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa public universities. The institutions that are privately run and which are governed by different regimes might have different autonomy patterns. The male-dominated sample is indicative of disciplinary gender ratios at the expense of underrepresenting the female experience, which may be influenced by other intersectional limitations. Moreover, the six-month period of fieldwork became innovative at specific implementation phases; longitudinal research will be able to track the development of innovations, their institutionalisation, and dissipation.

The institutional position of the researchers is also a worthy consideration of reflexivity. Being insiders to the higher education system of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, we had good contextual knowledge but at risk of assuming that we shared similar knowledge that made implicit dynamics invisibility. This risk was countered but not eradicated through efforts to maintain analytical distance by using peer debriefing and member checking.

## **Conclusion**

This case study about a number of cases throws some light on the intricate negotiations in which university instructors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa attempt to utilize curriculum autonomy within limited institutional conditions. Results indicate that teacher-led innovation does not occur as a result of a formal decree but rather as a result of maneuvering the bureaucracy and developing collegial solidarity as well as using negotiation strategies that are contextually suited. The three mentioned strategies, i.e. adaptive assimilation, collaborative resistance, and strategic subversion, are considered as different ways of responding to structural constraints, with its own risks and opportunities. These strategies work on an autonomy scale in which the teachers are under the most discretion in the pedagogic execution, not in its design, and alter the prescribed curricula by unauthorised supplementation and alternative testing.

The major contribution of the study is the theorisation of teacher autonomy as an ecological accomplishment, and not an institutional property, and how Pakistani scholars circumvent colonial bureaucratic heritage, social demands, and resource constraints in order to establish the opportunities to innovate. This reconceptualisation opposes policy discourses which diminish autonomy to formal delegation and it underlines the necessity of enabling structures which acknowledge professional judgment and defense risk-taking. The results highlight that the reform of the Pakistani government in terms of curriculum development in the public universities of the country does not only involve changing the policies but also changing the institutional cultures where the innovativeness of the teachers is seen as a deviance and not as a professional duty.

Future studies ought to build upon such analysis by longitudinal research studies of innovation trajectories, comparative research of the dynamics of private universities, and intersectional research of how gender, ethnicity, and career phase might influence negotiation strategies. Also, teacher, administrative, and policymaker action research would be able to devise context-based schemes of curriculum governance that would be balanced in terms of delivering quality



and professional discretion. It is hoped that this kind of collaborative investigation can help fill the long standing divide between the policy aspirations and the institutional realities of higher education to create educational systems in which teacher autonomy can be a source of quality education and not a battleground.

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