Organisational culture vs. change management process in higher education institutions: Context of a developing country

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Abstract

This qualitative research study deeply explores the impact of organizational culture within higher education institutions (HEIs) on change management processes. The research is guided by the influence of organizational culture on the success of change management initiatives in these unique settings. The research design was phenomenology. The participants were individuals involved in change management processes in various HEIs of Pakistan, encompassing administrators and faculty members. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to collect data through open-ended discussions on cultural elements, values, norms, and beliefs that either facilitate or hinder the success of change management initiatives in HEIs. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, organized, and analyzed systematically. Using thematic analysis, we identified the recurrent themes and patterns influencing the organizational culture in the change management process. Instead of having different challenges, culture plays a significant role in the change management process and is also a significant part of it. Sometimes resistance should be managed, and at times ignored. This research seeks to understand the dynamic interplay between change management processes at HEIs and their culture. It offers practical implications for administrators and faculty members seeking guidance to navigate change challenges in educational settings.

Keywords: Change management, Developing country, Higher education institutions, Organizational culture, Resistance management.

1. Introduction

Organizational culture forms the backbone of higher education institutions (HEIs), designing the internal institutional setups and responding to external pressures to meet social needs [1]. It is a combination of shared values, beliefs, practices, and principles that guide behavior and decision-making in academic and administrative tasks [2]. The literature provides various forms of culture, such as bureaucracy, collegium, corporation, and enterprise, which often coexist, with certain types becoming more dominant depending upon the context and the history of HEIs [3]. For example, a study revealed that bureaucratic and corporate cultures overlap, indicating a highly regulated environment streamlining policy decisions [4]. In developing regions, these cultural configurations are further influenced by factors such as historical legacies, innovative needs, resource constraints, infrastructure, and the quality of human resources and curricula [5]. Thus, organizational culture acts as a lens through which employees interpret and respond to new strategies, processes, or structures.

Organizational change is driven by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting market demands, an inevitable aspect of the dynamic business environment [6, 7]. Effective change management within an organization is a conscious task, as it thrives in the face of evolving challenges and directly impacts its ability to adapt and innovate [8]. The organizational culture and the shared values and behaviors are key determinants in the success or failure of change initiatives that shape how people work together within an organization [9, 10]. According to a study, organizational culture is fundamental in persuading employees' reactions, attitudes, and overall acceptance of change [11].

The literature emphasizes understanding and leveraging the existing cultural dynamics, which can be essential for effective change management [12, 13]. It guides leaders in aligning their initiatives with the prevailing values and norms [14]. Recent literature supports the enduring significance of organizational culture in the context of change. The literature highlights a critical role of supportive organizational culture in fostering employees' enthusiasm and commitment during change [15]. Furthermore, it is argued that a culture encouraging innovation and flexibility is crucial for navigating the uncertainties associated with transformative initiatives [8]. By investigating how cultural factors impact change processes, leaders can develop strategies that navigate resistance and capitalize on the strengths inherent in the existing organizational fabric.

The comparison of organizational culture and change management is particularly relevant in developing countries, where HEIs are under dominant pressure to innovate, expand, access, and improve quality. The literature supports that leadership plays a crucial role in influencing the associations between culture and change, with effective leadership styles particularly enhancing creativity [16]. However, structural changes without corresponding shifts in organizational culture risk resulting in only symbolic transformation [17]. Successful change management in HEIs needs careful investigation that integrates cultural assessments, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive leadership to ensure that reforms are both sustainable and meaningful in the long term [18]. Thus, the present qualitative study examined the change management process, focusing on cultural elements that facilitate or hinder effective change management within these institutions. The objectives of the present study were to explore the role of culture in the change management process within HEIs of Pakistan and to investigate the impact of culture on change management in HEIs of Pakistan.

1.1. Research Questions
The following two research questions guided the present study.
1. What is the role of culture in the change management process within higher education institutions in Pakistan?
2. How do the challenges of change impact the effectiveness of change management in higher education institutions of Pakistan?

2. Literature Review

Organizational culture is a multifaceted and deeply ingrained concept that molds an institution's identity through shared values, beliefs, and behaviors [19, 20]. In higher education, where traditions and institutional identity are highly valued, comprehending the intricacies of organizational culture is essential for navigating the complexities of change management [21].

2.1. Culture and Higher Education
Research indicates that to examine the difficulties evident in the culture of HEIs, an accompanying system has been utilized to provide a structured approach to investigation [22]. Several HEIs are steeped in history, where a firm commitment to winning with uninterrupted conventions and individuals having long residencies has become part of their firm culture. Culture has been categorized into four types: Person Culture, Power Culture, Task Culture, and Role Culture [23]. It is discovered that despite receiving innovations and putting resources into virtual learning environments (VLEs), little change was found in the actual practices of numerous organizations [24].

2.2. Organisational Culture Vs Change Management
The connection between change management and culture is multifaceted and dynamic; culture acts as both a facilitator and a barrier to change initiatives [25]. There is a key role of alignment between the existing culture and desired changes in the success or failure of change efforts. Recent studies have explored specific mechanisms through which organizational culture impacts change in HEIs [26]. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective change management, as it identifies cultural factors that may facilitate or hinder the implementation of desired changes [27].

2.3. Impact on Leadership Styles

The existing organizational culture significantly influences leadership styles, which are crucial in change management [28]. Research suggests that a robust organizational culture promoting innovation and risk-taking is conducive to transformational leadership, enhancing the effectiveness of change initiatives in higher education. Recent research builds upon this foundation, emphasizing the nuanced connection among leadership styles, culture, and higher education. The study also underscores the importance of leadership adaptability in diverse corporate cultures, shedding light on how leaders can tailor their approaches to align with specific cultural dynamics [29, 30].

2.4. Employee Engagement and Resistance

Employee engagement and resistance are integral components of change management. A study highlighted the role of an optimistic organizational culture in fostering open communication, trust, and inclusivity to mitigate resistance to change [31]. Conversely, a culture characterized by rigidity and resistance to new ideas may hinder the success of change initiatives. Expanding on this, a study investigated the cultural impact on employees' engagement during times of change in HEIs. The research explores how cultural factors influence employee perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately, their level of engagement in change processes [2].

2.5. Learning Organisations and Adaptability

HEIs need to function as learning organizations that encourage continuous learning and adaptability to thrive in today's dynamic environment [32]. A study emphasizes the importance of nurturing a learning culture within HEIs to navigate challenges posed by technological advancements and evolving pedagogical approaches [33]. Building on this, a study investigated the role of culture in organizations in shaping the learning environment within HEIs. The research explores how cultural factors influence an institution's adaptability to emerging trends in education, providing insights into the intersection of culture and adaptability in the change management process [4]. The intricate interplay between change management at HEIs and their culture has been a subject of growing scholarly interest. Recent studies have provided nuanced insights into the influence of culture on employee engagement, leadership styles, and an institution's capacity for adaptability [29, 34]. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for crafting effective change management strategies that resonate with the unique culture in the context of HEIs.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The present study aimed to explore the impact of culture on change management processes in Pakistan's HEIs. The phenomenological research design was followed to explore participants' perceptions of how they see and experience organizational culture and change management phenomena. It is a well-suited design to explore complex, context-dependent phenomena such as organizational culture and change management within specific settings.

3.2. Participants

This study's participants were the Vice Chancellors (VCs), Registrars, Treasurers, Controllers, Directors of Research, Directors of the Quality Assurance Agency, Deans, and Heads of Departments within selected universities. These participants had direct experience with change management initiatives and organizational culture dynamics. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the selection of those involved in recent change initiatives within their respective institutions. A total of twenty-one participants: three VCs, two registrars, two controllers, five directors, four deans, and five HODs were included in the study. Out of them, ten were female participants. The experience of the participants ranges from fifteen to forty years. Almost all of the participants had a doctorate in their respective disciplines. Surprisingly, six of the participants had degrees in management and development studies.

3.3. Development of Interview Protocol

To collect the data, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol was developed to understand participants' perception of change in the pre-change or planning phase, during the change or implementation stage, and after the sustaining period. Initially, we conducted an extensive review to explore the pertinent areas and develop questions for a semi-structured interview protocol. We read several change management models and cultural factors influencing HEIs' culture and change management process. Based on these insights, open-ended questions were drafted to encourage rich, detailed responses while allowing participants to share their experiences and perceptions. The protocol was then reviewed by academic experts in organizational studies and higher education to enhance clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Pilot interviews were conducted with a few academic and administrative members to refine question wording and sequencing, ensuring the protocol was comprehensive and flexible enough to accommodate emerging topics during interviews. With the help of pilot interviews, the interview duration was also determined, forty-five minutes to one hour. The final interview protocol includes questions such as: Do you think culture, norms, and beliefs of society affect the change process? How does culture affect change processes? What are the challenges of change? Do you have to face employee resistance, and if so, how do you manage that? How do you overcome their fears and ensure their participation in the process?

3.4. Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews with participants to capture their personal experiences and perspectives on culture and its relation to the institutional change management process. These semi-structured interviews involved taking

notes and identifying and describing themes based on participants' responses. Respectively, all interview sessions took almost forty-five to sixty minutes, ensuring thorough exploration while respecting participants' time constraints. Data saturation, indicating sufficient information collection, was determined through a rigorous iterative process, where analysis revealed emerging patterns and insights.

3.5. Data Analysis

After recording interviews, researchers transcribed them. Then, they were reviewed regularly to ensure that what was in the recordings was present in the transcriptions. To analyze data, a six-stage guide for thematic analysis was followed [35]. During the initial thematic analysis stage, all data were reviewed thoroughly to understand the content fully. Then, the researcher established initial codes that marked important sections within the data that discussed diverse subjects, emotional aspects, and participant-experienced events and difficulties.

3.6. Research Ethics

We adhered strictly to research ethics in conducting the current study on organizational culture and the change management process in HEIs of a developing country such as Pakistan. Before conducting interviews, we obtained written consent from participants for their voluntary participation. They were also provided with a brief understanding of the research and data collection process and given the right to withdraw from the study settings. Furthermore, we ensured their anonymity by not asking questions or personal details that could reveal their identity. The respondents were assured of their confidentiality. The interviews were recorded with their permission and will not be shared with anyone. They will be used only for the sake of the current study. Considering the cultural norms, we recorded interviews only with the audio option. There was no psychological or physical harm involved in the data collection process.

4. Results

To get answers to the first research question, what is the role of culture in the change management process within higher education institutions in Pakistan? Research participants were asked about the role and how culture affects the change process. They expressed that culture is significant in this regard. Emerged themes from participants' responses are listed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1.
Culture vs Change Management.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Culture Vs Change Management Process	Change should be deliberately planned by considering cultural limits.
	Culture confines females more than males in society.
	The culture of using excessive social media has unwanted consequences for students' and faculty members' performance.
	There is a great contradiction between the culture within and outside the organisations.
	Change and culture are two sides of a coin, and no one can abstain from either.

Figure 1.
Culture vs. Change Management.

Theme 1. Culture vs. Change Management

Almost all respondents acknowledged that culture significantly influences change management processes in various ways. However, they emphasized that change must be strategically planned within cultural boundaries to ensure that all elements, including culture, are supportive. Director QEC 2 noted that "*educational institutions should foster a culture that guarantees changes do not conflict with the interests of individuals, particularly concerning race, caste, religion, region, and ethics.*"

Treasurer 1, HOD 1, Director QEC 1, Deans 1 and 4 responded that women often face time constraints in universities. They believe this is a cultural issue, as women typically cannot leave home late due to numerous responsibilities. Consequently, cultural norms impose greater limitations on women than on their male counterparts. Registrar 1 said that *"change is directly proportional to culture. The working habits of people, beliefs, and norms of society affect the institutional processes."*

They also pointed out that over time, faculty members tend to form relationships that can lead to negative politics, significantly hindering innovation in change processes. Director Research 1 responded that "employees should align their values with organizational benefits."

Furthermore, VC 2 and Director Research 2 highlighted that, *"in academic contexts, issues arise from the excessive use of smartphones and social media, leading to poor performance among students and employees due to the time spent on these devices and applications."*

Registrar 1 affirmed that culture impacts organizations positively and negatively, with internal and external cultures often contrasting and sometimes clashing. For instance, a university hiring a professor on the 21 BPS scale while the public service commission offers the same position on the 20 BPS scale can lead to resistance among staff, despite the necessity to adhere to established recruitment rules. Dean 3 emphasized that culture is a double-edged sword; it both shapes change and is shaped by it. Director Research 2 stated that the *"culture established within an organization can either facilitate or hinder the change process."*

By analyzing data in response to research question 2, how does culture impact the effectiveness of change management in Pakistani higher education institutions? Challenges of change, causes of resistance, and resistance management appeared as central themes. The main themes and sub-themes are listed in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2.
Challenges of Change.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Challenges of Change	Discrepancies between the interests of people and institutional policies.
	Culture itself is a challenge.
	Lack of communication among planners and implementers of the change process.
	Reluctance and resistance from students, staff members, and faculty.

Theme 2: Challenges of Change

Figure 2.
Challenges of Change.

Vice Chancellor 2 and Treasurer 2 pointed out that there always exists a considerable communication gap between the planners and the implementers of the change process. The Director of QAA expressed that "*although the Higher Education Commission (HEC) considers various stakeholders' interests when developing policies, these interests often do not align with those of the general public once the policies are implemented.*" This misalignment creates a significant challenge. Moreover, cultural factors can complicate matters, as organizations may not provide sufficient resources or accurate data. Many participants, including vice chancellors, recognized that culture can sometimes act as both a barrier and a facilitator. Additionally, the Director of QAA, Vice Chancellor 1, Director of Research 2, Director of QEC 1, and Dean 3 noted that reluctance and resistance from faculty, students, staff members, and higher authorities represent significant challenges in implementing new policies Table 3 and Figure 3 present the details of sub-themes and codes.

Table 3.
Causes of Resistance.

| Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Causes of resistance	The prevailing environment of the comfort zone
	Increased workload for teachers.
	Female faculty members have time constraints when working late hours.
	Politics, backbiting, and non-trustworthiness among faculty members and students lead to negative behaviours.
	People have a fear of being considered incompetent and of unknown procedures.
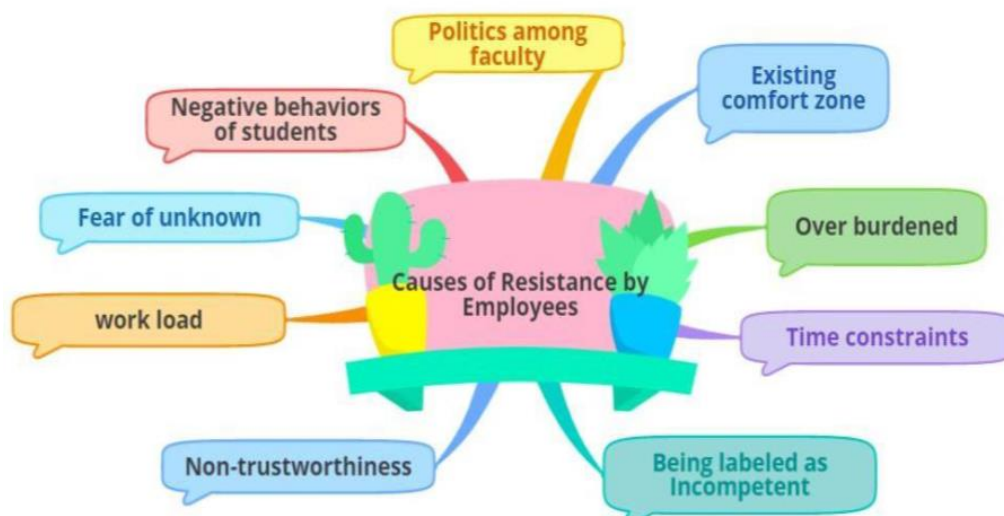
Figure 3.
Causes of Resistance.

Theme 3: Causes of Resistance

According to the participants, including VC 1, Registrar 1, and Dean 3, people frequently dislike changes because they prefer traditional methods and stick to familiar routines. The administrators, HOD 1, Treasurer 2, and Dean 4, indicated that faculty members and students exhibit negative behaviors, including political actions, backbiting, and untrustworthy behavior. According to Treasurer 2 and Dean 3, "*people naturally resist change, yet the main reason for their opposition starts from unpreparedness for organizational modifications.*" HOD 1, Dean 1, and Controller 1 indicated that the teaching staff handles excessive responsibilities. Female faculty deal with two conflicting problems since they are required to boost their institutional work while facing time-related restrictions that prevent extended work hours. Dean replied that such issues are rarely observed in educational institutions that focus exclusively on me. According to Registrar 1, some individuals oppose workers who perform their duties based on contracts (TTS). The employees fear job termination and being labeled as unskilled professionals. The Director of QAA commented that opposition to transformation emerges naturally. Her words pointed out that our people lack resistance capabilities, yet manifest weeping, sneaking behavior, and crying in response to changing circumstances. Faculty members typically show neither change responses nor resistance behavior during most situations. They accept it poorly. Furthermore, Table 4 and Figure 4 present the details of themes and sub-themes.

Table 4.
Resistance Management.

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Resistance management strategies	Implement steady and gradual changes instead of violent ones.
	Organisational goals should be parallel to those of employees.
	To keep the positive attitude towards change, convey positive energy, and drive forces
	Record activities, understand their restrictions, involve people, and communicate to resolve problems.
	Giving them direction through discussions and creating a collaborative working relationship
	To maintain and elevate their self-confidence, keep on saying encouraging phrases.
	Overlook the resistance

Figure 4.
Resistance Management.

Theme 4: Resistance Management

Research participants elaborated on different ways and tactics for resistance management. The majority of interview participants emphasize that change implementation should proceed slowly rather than by forceful means. Director QEC 2 responded that "*rapid organizational changes are not accepted*". Implementing system changes requires both rationale and logical factors for the process. VC 3 and Director Research 1 state that managing change and resistance is a two-way process. Three participants stated that "*goals between employees and the organization need mutual alignment, while employees should form individual planning approaches that match the organizational vision.*" Treasurer 2 and Dean 3 advocate the benefits of change, making it easier for people to accept and incorporate change. By being supportive and inspirational, VC 2 and Treasurer 2 ensure positive change in attitudes among employees. The key team members include VC 2, HOD 1, Controller 1, Dean 1, Treasurer 1, Treasurer 2, Director QEC 1, Registrar 1, Dean 3, and Dean 4 who focus on involving people during processes, maintaining records, understanding restrictions, and resolving issues through communication and utilizing

relationship-based methods for the resolution of resistance. Director QEC 2 and Director QAA state that "*controlling resistance requires both the involvement of team members and providing clear direction towards their goals*." They say positive statements about their capabilities will enhance efficiency and effectiveness and create a better working environment. All members hold a significant role in the team while bringing unique abilities to the organization. Show them that you own this responsibility and must perform up to the task, even though you can accomplish it. The selected statements help preserve their confidence at high levels. Resistance management follows different approaches, as Director Research 1 and Controller 2 explained, "*occasional emotional reactions of employees sometimes should remain unnoticed by leaders*." The resistance phase remains brief when individuals are present, yet it becomes problematic for people when this stage is disregarded, which leads to poor acceptance of change.

5. Discussion

Two research questions guided the present study. After collecting data, it was analyzed to get answers to those research questions. During the analysis, we found that people often occupy a comfort zone that fosters a sense of safety, security, and familiarity [36]. Stepping beyond this comfort zone and trying new things can make individuals uneasy and frightened. Being outside one's comfort zone becomes intimidating because it involves taking risks, trying new things, and facing potential setbacks. People often feel intimidated when leaving familiar environments to embark on unprecedented experiences. Fear leads individuals to doubt whether upcoming circumstances will resemble past ones and whether they can successfully manage an unfamiliar environment. Such a change creates expectations of failure, as it may not align with existing standard operational procedures. It is crucial to pay attention to staff training during the introduction of innovations, as these changes often require the development of new competencies among personnel. Culture and change are two sides of a coin; neither can be prevented from the other while considering change. Change is directly proportional to culture, so it must be planned according to one's cultural limits. Employees should match their values with the organizational benefits. The working habits of people, beliefs, and norms of society affect the institutional processes. The social media culture is bringing undesirable results regarding students' and faculty members' performance. Culture restricts females more in society due to their dual responsibilities.

This necessitates the organization of advanced training or sometimes retraining, depending on the needs of the enterprise [18]. Furthermore, our study emphasized that transitioning to a new and different state is essential for organizations to survive and remain competitive [16]. Effectively managing organizational change essentially involves addressing the people aspects of the process. Employees are the foundation of organizations and the driving force behind change; they will either embrace or resist it. Therefore, for an organization to succeed in changing, it is vital that its employees also adapt. Consequently, employee cooperation with organizational change initiatives is closely linked to such efforts' ultimate success or failure [1].

At times, the culture within an organization can clash with external influences, leading to resistance. An organization's culture stems from the collective life experiences of its employees [37]. Future organizations will likely shift from traditional hierarchies to more empowering, team-oriented, and collaborative cultures. Hence, modern organizations need to evolve their planning systems, selection, motivation, management, rewards, recognition, appraisals, recruitment, and employee development [38].

6. Conclusions

A wide-ranging literature review shows a lack of research on the influence of culture and its challenges in HEIs in the context of a developing country. This study is one of the few to investigate the impact of culture on change management at HEIs. The present study collected data from academicians and administrative staff, who were considered the change agents in public and private HEIs in Pakistan. The research findings offer an original contribution by confirming the facilitating role of academicians in the change management process. The main themes that arose from the answers of the participants were culture vs. change management, challenges of change, causes of resistance, and strategies for resistance management. The first theme indicates that culture plays a significant role in the change management process and is also a significant part of it. In the second theme, research participants highlighted different sources of challenges. They were: resistance to implementing and accepting change, excessive documentation, non-competent employees, resistance, people from diverse cultures, a mismatch between people's interests and the policies, and a communication gap between parties. The third central theme was the causes of resistance: people fear the unknown results and being labeled as incompetent, politics among employees, working time constraints, workload, and above all, their existing comfort zones. The fourth central theme was strategies for resistance management: keep a positive attitude towards change, there should be alignment among employees' and organizational goals, keep a record of all activities against key performance indicators, understand employees' limitations, make a team of potential and capable employees, hold discussions, and resolve their problems to sustain the positive impact of change. Incorporating the study's results in HEIs can bring significant changes and innovations.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

The qualitative study was limited to the higher education institutions of Lahore and had minimal generalizability. Future studies could expand beyond the participation of administrators by comparing these factors across various regions and educational contexts within Pakistan. Furthermore, exploring the efficacy of workload management strategies can offer valuable insights for teachers and students aiming to enhance the quality of institutions. Additionally, quantitative research delving into the students' viewpoints concerning culture and change management could contribute to a more holistic understanding of the higher education system and its effects on all involved parties.

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