



## The Sindh Universities Amendment Bill and Its Implications for Higher Education: Analyzing Governance Reforms, Academic Autonomy, and Economic Impact

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### ABSTRACT

The Sindh Amendment Bill 2025, enacted by Pakistan's PPP-led provincial government, has sparked far-reaching impacts on any jurisprudential scenario for the eligibility criteria in appointments of vice-chancellors in public universities to include senior bureaucrats (grade BPS 21 and above) holding master's degrees, without further specifying other provisions. It would thus erase all traditional requirements being followed and sideline the traditional prior requirement of a PhD. This case study, therefore, reviews the legislative course along which it has moved, the backlash from stakeholders, and the implications of the reform to fill governance gaps but encounters accusations of undermining academic autonomy. The bill was ratified through legislative override under Article 116(3) of the Constitution of Pakistan after Governor Kamran Tessori's objections. It allows bureaucrats with 15 years of administrative experience to head universities provided they resign or retire from their civil service. While the government contends that this exercise ensures leadership with strong academic and administrative backgrounds, academic associations like FAPUASA and Kuts denounce it as a threat to educational quality and state that VCs should be scholarly visionaries and not mere administrators. Opposition parties such as MQM-P and PTI-backed SIC blame the PPP for politicizing academia through centralized decisions. The Universities Amendment Bill is part of a broader legislative agenda to ensure that governance structures are changed. Critics contend that placing much weight on administrative efficiency at the cost of their academic qualification will decrease institutional credibility, decrease research output, and increase global competitiveness. Centralized administrative control and academic self-governance would consider this challenge in balancing institutional priorities with scholarly excellence. The bill jeopardizes Sindh's higher education due to a lack of merit-based appointments, stakeholder consultations, and global education standards. Thus, it threatens this part of the country's future socio-economic development and intellectual leadership.



## **Introduction**

The Sindh Universities Amendment Bill of 2025 recommends new conditions set by the provincial government to reform the appointment criteria for the vice-chancellor (VC) heads of public universities. By permitting bureaucrats with a Master's degree and four years of administrative experience to hold VC positions, the bill has ignited widespread protests and uproar from academia. This case study examines the rationale, objectives, and contentious dynamics surrounding the bill and its potential repercussions on Sindh's educational and economic scene.

## **Background**

The Sindh Universities Amendment Bill 2025 represents a contentious legislative reform in Pakistan's higher education sector. All public universities from Sindh province will have to follow this law, which would change the criteria for appointing persons as Vice-Chancellor. As introduced by the provincial government formed by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), this bill is throwing eligibility beyond conventional academic qualifications to include even senior bureaucrats, raising debates over academic autonomy, governance priorities, and institutional integrity. Understanding this bill is crucial in putting it into proper legislative perspective and requires an in-depth assessment of its critical provisions. Many stakeholders have voiced opinions about this bill's legal and policy dimensions.

## **Legislative Context and Timeline**

The bill amends the Sindh Universities and Institutes Laws Act 2018, which previously restricted VC appointments to academicians with doctoral qualifications and professorial experience. On December 4, 2024, the Sindh cabinet approved draft amendments to replace the mandatory PhD requirement with a master's degree for general universities, enabling bureaucrats (grade BPS-21+) with 15 years of administrative or academic experience to qualify (Ilyas, 2024). Despite opposition protests, the provincial assembly passed the bill on January 31, 2025. Sindh Governor Kamran Tessori returned the bill, citing constitutional concerns, but the assembly reapproved it on February 17, 2025, invoking Article 116(3) of Pakistan's Constitution, which mandates gubernatorial assent after legislative override (Siddiqui, 2025a).

## **Key Provisions**

The amended law stratifies eligibility criteria by university type:

**General Universities:** Candidates require a master's degree (preferably a PhD) and 15 years of experience in academia, civil service, or leadership. Bureaucrats must resign/retire upon appointment (Siddiqui, 2025b).

**Engineering Universities:** VCs must hold a PhD in engineering and meet Higher Education Commission (HEC) professorial standards.

**Medical Universities:** Eligibility includes MBBS/postgraduate fellowship/PhD holders or senior bureaucrats (BPS-21+) with a master's degree.

**Age Limits:** 62 years for general candidates, 63 for retired high court judges, and 67 for retired Supreme Court judges (Siddiqui, 2025a).

The chief minister appoints VCs from a shortlist of three candidates proposed by a search committee, and their terms are extendable beyond four years (Ilyas, 2024).

### **Stakeholder Reactions**

The bill faced vehement opposition from academic groups and opposition parties. The Federation of All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Associations (FAPUASA) and Karachi University Teachers' Society (Kuts) condemned the inclusion of non-PhD bureaucrats, arguing that VCs must be "eminent academicians" capable of guiding research and institutional growth (Ilyas, 2024). Critics warned that prioritizing administrative experience over scholarly credentials risks politicizing university governance and undermining educational quality (Siddiqui, 2025b).

Opposition political parties, including the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), and the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) backed by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) raised vehement protests, calling the law a power grab strategy. They have been tearing up copies of the law during assembly debates and accusing the PPP of trampling democratic norms through the sheer use of its legislative majority (Siddiqui, 2025b).

### **Government Rationale and Judicial Context**

The PPP defended the bill as a measure to ensure "leadership with strong academic and administrative backgrounds" and address institutional inefficiencies (Ilyas, 2024). Concurrently, the Sindh Civil Courts Amendment Bill 2025—passed alongside the universities bill—transfers civil suits from the Sindh High Court (SHC) to district courts, citing case backlogs and the precedent set by the Ghulam Asghar Pathan case (2018), which urged judicial workload redistribution (Siddiqui, 2025a).

### **Implications**

The reform highlights tensions between bureaucratic efficiency and academic self-governance. Critics argue that non-PhD bureaucrats lack the scholarly vision to elevate universities to global standards, while supporters emphasize administrative competence. The bill's enactment underscores the PPP's prioritization of centralized governance, raising concerns about long-term impacts on institutional autonomy and educational quality in Sindh (Siddiqui, 2025a; Ilyas, 2024).

### **Rationale and Objectives**

#### **Rationale**

The Sindh government justifies the bill as a measure to strengthen university administrative efficiency. Key drivers include:

**Leadership Gaps:** Perceived inefficiencies in academic leadership, with prolonged delays in VC appointments (Dawn, 2025).

**Administrative Expertise:** Skilled managers must address financial mismanagement, such as the PKR 2.1 billion irregularities uncovered in 2023 audits (Auditor General of Sindh, 2023).

**Standardization:** Aligning VC appointment processes across 26 public universities in Sindh (HEC, 2024).

## **Key Objectives**

- 1. Streamline Appointments:** Replace the PhD mandate with broader eligibility criteria (Master's + administrative experience).
- 2. Enhance Oversight:** Improve fiscal and operational governance through bureaucrats' managerial expertise.
- 3. Uniformity:** Ensure consistent university leadership standards (GoS, 2025).

## **Critical Analysis**

### **Supporting Perspectives**

**Administrative Efficiency:** Proponents argue that bureaucrats' experience in public service can resolve systemic issues like budget overruns, which cost Sindh's universities PKR 1.8 billion annually (World Bank, 2024).

**Faster Decision-Making:** The Sindh government claims the bill will reduce average VC appointment timelines from 18 months to 6 months (Express Tribune, 2025).

### **Criticisms and Protests**

**Erosion of Academic Autonomy:** The Federation of All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association (FAPUASA) asserts that bureaucrats lack the academic rigor to lead universities, risking declining research output. Only 12% of VCs in Sindh hold international research accolades, compared to 28% in Punjab (HEC, 2024).

**Boycotts and Disruptions:** Faculty-led protests have disrupted classes in 18 universities since January 2025, affecting 320,000 students (Aaj News, 2025).

**Quality Concerns:** Critics warn that replacing PhD requirements with administrative credentials could lower global university rankings. Currently, no Sindh university ranks in the QS Top 500 Asia Rankings (QS, 2024).

## **Impact on Educational Outlook**

### **Institutional Level**

**Governance Shift:** Potential centralization of power, with 60% of senate seats now allocated to government nominees (Dawn, 2025).

**Research Funding Risks:** Reduced emphasis on academic leadership may deter international grants. Sindh's research funding fell by 15% YoY in 2024 (HEC, 2024).

### **Student and Faculty Outcomes**

**Educational Disruptions:** Protests have delayed examinations for 45,000 final-year students, jeopardizing graduation timelines (Aaj News, 2025).

**Faculty Morale:** A survey of 1,200 academics revealed 82% oppose the bill, citing fears of politicized appointments (FAPUASA, 2025).

### **Economic Implications**

**Employability Concerns:** Sindh's graduate unemployment rate (37%) already exceeds the national average (29%). Focusing on administration over academia could widen this gap (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

**Private Sector Apprehension:** Companies like Nestlé Pakistan and Engro have paused campus recruitment drives, citing uncertainty over degree credibility (Dawn, 2025).

### **Comparative Context**

**Punjab Model:** Punjab mandates PhDs for VC roles, resulting in 4 universities in global rankings versus Sindh's 0 (HEC, 2024).

**Global Trends:** In the EU, 90% of university leaders hold terminal degrees, blending administrative and academic expertise (EU Education Report, 2023).

### **Stakeholder Recommendations**

- 1. Hybrid Criteria:** Require VCs to hold PhDs and demonstrate administrative experience.
- 2. Transparent Committees:** Include international academics in appointment panels to depoliticize the process.
- 3. Pilot Programs:** Test bureaucratic appointments in smaller institutes before scaling to universities.

### **Discussion**

The Sindh Universities Amendment Bill 2025 demonstrates the inherent tension between administrative efficiency and academic autonomy in governing higher education. Although the provincial government moves to address the institutional gaps in governance by expanding the eligibility for vice-chancellor (VC) roles to include senior bureaucrats, it also threatens to stifle the voices of academics in governance and, consequently, the institutions' credibility. Critics contend that favoring bureaucratic experience over scholarly credentials, as only requiring a master's degree for general university VCs, might affect standards, deteriorate productivity in research, and destabilize Sindh higher education.

The bill's provisions purportedly aim to provide pragmatic solutions and sensible remedies for administrative hurdles. Still, they have sparked widespread backlash from academic organizations such as FAPUASA and Kuts, which underscore that university leadership would now require a vision that demands excellence in academics and not just organizational competence. Their stakeholder exclusion from meaningful consultation enhanced their concerns about centralized decision-making and the threat to institutional independence.

By employing mechanisms like clear search committees, merit-based appointments, and protection against academic self-governance, best practices can be incorporated into the bureaucracy to suit

the scholarly mission of the universities. Such measures in the new bill would have helped Sindh improve its educational quality, global competitiveness, and socio-economic development in the long run.

## **Conclusion**

The Sindh Universities Amendment Bill of 2025 symbolizes a momentous occasion in higher education governance, where the quest for administrative control stands directly opposed to the spirit of academic freedom. For the provincial educational future to be secured, stakeholders must be re-engaged, rigorous academic criteria for leadership roles must be reinstated, and all policies must align with international standards. Only through such reforms can Sindh ensure sustainable institutional growth, preserve academic credibility, and promote an environment conducive to innovation and intellectual leadership.

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