

## **Distributed Leadership and Early-Career Turnover Intention Among Generation Z Faculty of Higher Education A Comparative Study of Public Private Sectors**

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### **Abstract**

*This study looked at whether a way of running a university called distributed leadership where decisions and responsibilities are shared among staff rather than kept only by senior managers can help keep these young teachers, known as Generation Z, in their roles. It also looked at whether feeling engaged and enthusiastic at work helps explain this link, and whether the pattern differs between public and private universities, between men and women, and across different lengths of early-career experience. Data were collected from young faculty members at universities in Punjab. The results showed that when universities share decision-making, delegate real responsibility, and encourage teamwork, young faculty are far less likely to want to leave. Faculty who felt more engaged and enthusiastic about their work were also much less likely to think about quitting. This pattern was stronger in private universities than in public ones, and stronger for female faculty and those with a little more experience. Overall, the study suggests that giving Generation Z faculty a genuine voice in how their university is run is one of the most effective ways to keep talented young teachers from leaving.*

**Keywords:** distributed leadership; Generation Z; turnover intention; work engagement; higher education; Pakistan; faculty retention

### **Introduction**

Pakistani schools are facing challenges in retaining their fresh teachers. Many young faculty members those from Generation Z, broadly born between 1997 and 2012 are leaving their jobs earlier than older generations did, and this is making an existing shortage of qualified teaching staff worse (HEC, 2023; Dimock, 2019).

Generation Z was born into a world of smart phones, social media, and collaborative tools online. As a result, they are more likely than others to appreciate having a voice in decision-making, working in a team, and having their ideas considered (Twenge, 2023; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). These preferences are very similar to those that researchers define as distributed leadership – that is, a mode of governing a school in which leadership is not confined to senior administrators but is shared among a school's staff members (Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2008).

In theory, there is a relation between this, however there has never been a study conducted in Pakistani universities. Most of the studies conducted on faculty turnover here have been conducted on the faculty member's salaries, workloads, and manner of supervision without studying the structure of leadership and the reaction of the various generations to the leadership (Batool et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2020). The public and private sector universities are also divided in Pakistan, and it is too early to determine if distributed leadership provides the same level of job security and salary in both sectors. (HEC, 2023)

This study aims at filling these gaps. It investigates the potential relationships between distributed leadership and the intention of faculty members in the Generation Z to leave their roles, the role of feeling engaged at work in explaining part of this relationship, and whether the relationship varies by university sector, gender, and years of experience. The research is designed to provide university leadership and policy makers with practical, evidence-based information about strategies to retain talented young academics.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyse the relationship between distributed leadership and turnover intention of Generation Z faculty members in Pakistani Universities.
2. To test work engagement as a mediator of the distributed leadership–turnover intention relationship.
3. To investigate if this relationship is modified by university sector, gender and years in early career experience.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is there a reduction in the intention to quit among the Gen Z faculty members of Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan as a result of distributed leadership?
2. Is there any relationship between distributed leadership and turnover intention beyond the mediation of work engagement?
3. Does work engagement explain the relationship between distributed leadership and turnover intention?
3. Does the relationship between distributed leadership and turnover intention differ based on the university sector, gender, and experience of early-careers?

### **Literature Review**

Distributed leadership is a process that involves sharing the functions of planning, problem solving and decision making among many rather than one or two high-ranking individuals (Spillane, 2005; Gronn, 2002). Leadership is not something for the department head or vice-chancellor to do; it is something that may be done by many staff members in a manner that is appropriate to the task at hand depending on who has the required skills and/or knowledge.

Based on a large review of 67 studies, this form of shared leadership is associated with increased staff commitment, increased staff satisfaction and increased willingness to do more than one's job requires, primarily because shared leadership fosters a sense of trust and teamwork (Hulpia et al., 2011). Distributed leadership can be seen in universities in terms of

decision-making regarding courses, research direction and university policy regarding departments (Bolden et al., 2009). Often faculty prefer this sense of having their voice more than formal recognition or pay. Distributed leadership could be particularly crucial in retaining workers in Generation Z because they are known to desire precisely this type of involvement (Twenge, 2023).

### **Gen Z, Engagement, and the need for autonomy**

Generation Z has been identified as individuals born from 1997 to 2012 who entered into the job market after 2018 (Dimock, 2019). They have been raised with the use of smartphones and collaborative apps from a young age, and they have experienced the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the global calls for more openness and accountability from institutions (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2023). This generation is keen for openness, collaboration, quick feedback and a clear direction in the workplace. In addition, they are less likely than previous generations to be automatically loyal to their employer and are more likely to think about leaving if their job fails to meet these expectations (Twenge, 2023).

This is because of Self-Determination Theory. It is based on the premise that people are motivated when they have choice and control (autonomy), feel capable (competence), and feel connected to others (relatedness) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Shared decision-making fosters autonomy, collaborative work fosters competence, and working in close quarters with colleagues fosters relatedness all three of which are supported by distributed leadership. If these needs are fulfilled, staff are more engaged, are full of energy, dedicated, and absorbed in what they do (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

In Pakistan, there are two major categories of universities. Public universities tend to have a more stable employment contract, but they are managed more hierarchically and top-down, while private universities tend to pay higher, but are held to be more performance driven and are also more varied in their leadership style and culture (HEC, 2023; Batool et al., 2021). Distributed leadership might matter more for private sector staff, as they do not have the safety net of permanent public sector jobs, so they may be more likely to feel secure and motivated to stay in their workplace if they have a supportive, participative approach.

Staff's response to shared leadership may also be influenced by gender. Many studies conducted in various workplaces have found that women are more positively affected by collaborative, team-oriented leadership behavior and are more satisfied and willing to stay on the job through joint leadership (Purvanova & Muros, 2010; Zhang, 2023).

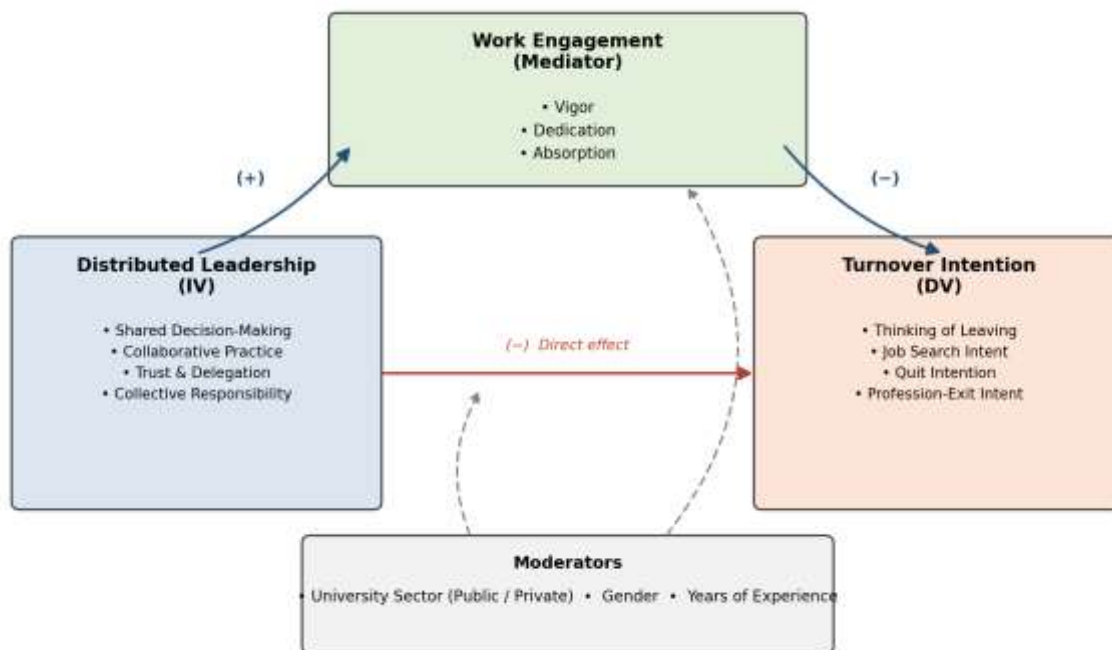
Lastly, years of experience could be important. New staff in their first year, or two, may not have the experience to fully understand the workings of their university and fully engage in a shared approach to decision making. Somewhat more experienced staff will often be better suited to participate in a meaningful way in distributed leadership and to benefit from it (Spillane, 2005; Bolden et al., 2009).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in this study is the construction of distributed leadership, which consists of shared decision-making, collaborative practice, trust and delegation, and collective responsibility that will be the main variables expected to reduce the intention of the faculty members to turn over Generation Z. This relationship is believed to be mediated, in part, by

work engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption), which connects the leadership practice to the intentions to stay/leave. The strength of the two types of links is expected to be different by university sector (public or private), gender and by years of experience.

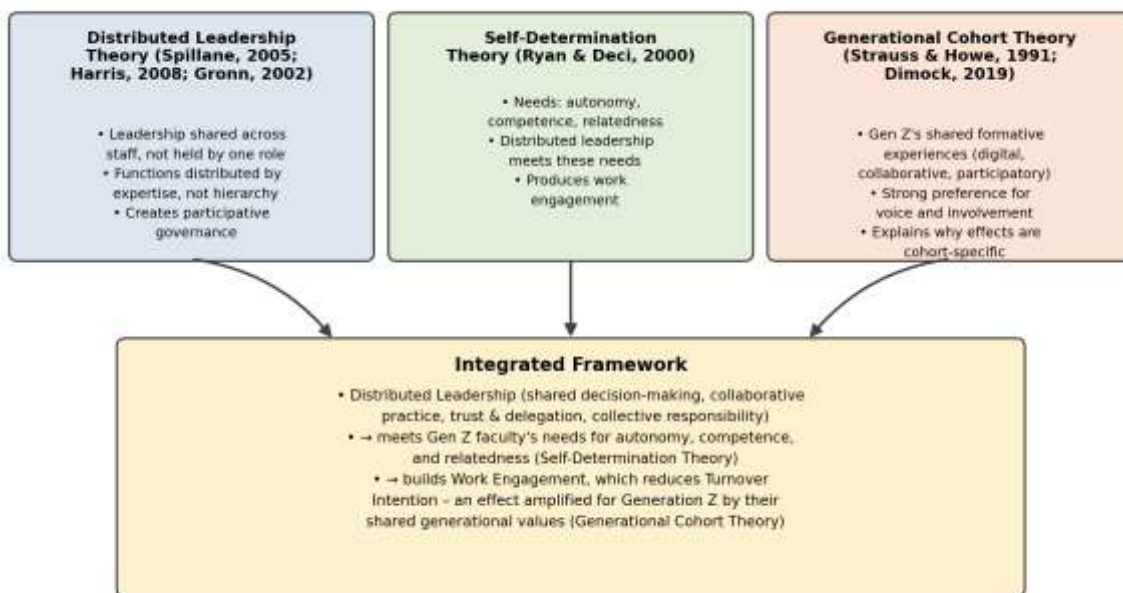
**Figure 1**  
Conceptual Framework: Distributed Leadership and Gen Z Faculty Turnover Intention in Pakistani Higher Education



**Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on three theories. Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2008; Gronn, 2002) describes how sharing of leadership responsibilities amongst staff members helps to establish a participative classroom that Generation Z faculty desire. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) describes the psychological mechanism: distributed leadership addresses staff needs to have control, skill, and a sense of belonging, which leads to work engagement and lower turnover. Generational Cohort Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Dimock, 2019) gives the rationale behind this, i.e. their formative experiences render them especially sensitive to participative leadership models from earlier generations of staff.

**Figure 2**  
*Theoretical Framework: Three Integrated Theories Underpinning Distributed Leadership and Gen Z Faculty Retention*



## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design and thus the relationships between distributed leadership, work engagement and turnover intention were examined statistically, including a comparison of the relationships between distributed leadership, work engagement and turnover intention across sector, gender, and experience level (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study aimed to draw conclusions about what is happening at a particular moment in time and not to show how things change over time, so a cross-sectional design was used.

### Population and Sample

This study was carried out on early career faculty members from the Generation Z (born 1997 to 2005) who are working in the academic institutions located in two provinces of Punjab and Sindh which have maximum number of university students in Pakistan (HEC, 2023) and also focused on those faculty members who have 1 to 5 years of experience in their current positions. The number of participants was 412 faculty members across 22 universities (11 public; 11 private) selected using a stratified random sampling technique to achieve a balanced distribution across sector, province and academic department (STEM, social sciences, business, and humanities). A power analysis was performed and a sample size greater than the number used in this study demonstrated that there were meaningful effects.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 412)*

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	228	55.3
	Female	184	44.7

University Sector	Public	214	51.9
	Private	198	48.1
Province	Punjab	251	60.9
	Sindh	161	39.1
Academic Rank	Lecturer	198	48.1
	Assistant Professor	214	51.9
Experience	1 year	96	23.3
	2 years	108	26.2
	3 years	89	21.6
	4 years	74	18.0
	5 years	45	10.9
Qualification	MS/MPhil	187	45.4
	PhD	225	54.6
Department	STEM	118	28.6
	Social Sciences	104	25.2
	Business	98	23.8
	Humanities	92	22.3

### Reliability Analysis

All scales showed good to excellent reliability. The Distributed Leadership Scale had an overall reliability score of .91 (subscale range .84–.89). The Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) had an overall score of .88, with its three parts Vigor, dedication, and absorption – all above .80. The Turnover Intention Scale had a reliability score of .86. All values were well above the minimum acceptable level of .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

### Data Collection Instruments

Three established scales were used. The Distributed Leadership Scale (20 items) measured four aspects of shared leadership shared decision-making, collaborative practice, trust and delegation, and collective responsibility each rated on a 5-point scale (Hulpia et al., 2011; Spillane, 2005). The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (9 items) measured vigor, dedication, and absorption on a 7-point scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The Turnover Intention Scale (6 items) measured how often faculty thought about leaving, searching for other jobs, resigning within a year, or leaving the profession altogether, rated on a 5-point scale (Mobley, 1977; Bothma & Roodt, 2013). All scales were translated into Urdu using standard forward-and-back translation and have been used successfully in similar settings.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, regression analysis, independent samples t-tests comparing public and private universities, and mediation and moderation analysis using Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Effect sizes were interpreted using standard guidelines (Cohen, 1988).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Overall, faculty reported moderate levels of distributed leadership and moderately high work engagement, alongside moderate turnover intention – reflecting the elevated turnover concerns typical of this generation. Faculty at private universities reported higher turnover intention than those at public universities, likely reflecting the lower job security of private sector employment.

**Table 2**  
*Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables (N = 412)*

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	$\alpha$
Distributed Leadership (DL) — Total	3.44	0.64	1.25	5.00	.91
Shared Decision-Making	3.38	0.71	1.00	5.00	.86
Collaborative Practice	3.52	0.69	1.20	5.00	.87
Trust and Delegation	3.41	0.73	1.00	5.00	.84
Collective Responsibility	3.46	0.68	1.20	5.00	.89
Work Engagement (WE) — Total	3.72	0.81	0.78	6.00	.88
Vigor	3.68	0.89	0.67	6.00	.83
Dedication	3.81	0.84	0.67	6.00	.87
Absorption	3.66	0.86	0.67	6.00	.81
Turnover Intention (TI) — Total	3.08	0.91	1.00	5.00	.86
Public university faculty	2.93	0.91	1.00	5.00	—
Private university faculty	3.24	0.88	1.17	5.00	—

Note.  $N = 412$ . DL measured on a 5-point scale. WE (UWES-9) measured on a 7-point scale (0–6). TI measured on a 5-point scale.  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha. Sector rows are subgroup means, not separate scales.

### Correlation Analysis

Distributed leadership was strongly linked to lower turnover intention and to higher work engagement, and work engagement itself was strongly linked to lower turnover intention. Among the four aspects of distributed leadership, shared decision-making showed the strongest links with both engagement and turnover intention, followed closely by trust and delegation – supporting the idea that having a genuine say in decisions, and being trusted with real responsibility, matter most to Generation Z faculty.

**Table 3**  
*Pearson Correlation Matrix: Distributed Leadership, Work Engagement, and Turnover Intention*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
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1. DL Total	—					
2. Shared Decisions	.82**	—				
3. Trust & Delegation	.79**	.68**	—			
4. Work Engagement	.67**	.63**	.61**	—		
5. Turnover Intention	-.62**	-.59**	-.57**	-.58**	—	
6. Sector (0=pub,1=prv)	.14**	.11*	.13**	-.09	.22**	—

### Regression Analysis

A simple regression analysis confirmed that distributed leadership was a strong predictor of turnover intention, explaining a substantial share of the differences between faculty in how likely they were to consider leaving. When the four aspects of distributed leadership were examined separately, shared decision-making and trust and delegation stood out as the strongest individual predictors of lower turnover intention, followed by collective responsibility and collaborative practice. For work engagement, shared decision-making and collaborative practice were the strongest predictors.

**Table 4**  
*Simple Linear Regression: Distributed Leadership Predicting Gen Z Faculty Turnover Intention*

Predictor / Model	B	SE	$\beta$	t-value	p
Constant	5.72	0.22	—	26.00	< .001
Distributed Leadership (DL)	-0.77	0.05	-.54	-16.78	< .001
Model: $R^2 = .41$ Adj. $R^2 = .40$ $F(1, 410) = 281.57, p < .001$					

### Public vs. Private Sector Comparison

Comparing public and private universities showed clear differences. Faculty at private universities reported notably higher turnover intention than those at public universities, while distributed leadership was rated more highly at public universities than private ones – consistent with the more collegial, less hierarchical culture often found in public institutions. Work engagement did not differ significantly between the two sectors, suggesting that while private university staff feel just as engaged in their work, they are more likely to act on dissatisfaction with leadership structures by considering leaving.

**Table 5**  
*Independent Samples t-Test: Distributed Leadership, Engagement, and Turnover Intention by Sector*

Variable	Public M (SD)	Private M (SD)	t-value	p	Cohen's d
Distributed Leadership	3.56 (0.61)	3.31 (0.66)	3.99***	< .001	0.40

Work Engagement	3.76 (0.80)	3.67 (0.83)	1.42	.156	0.11
Turnover Intention	2.93 (0.91)	3.24 (0.88)	3.48***	.001	0.35
Shared Decision-Making	3.52 (0.68)	3.23 (0.73)	4.21***	< .001	0.41
Trust and Delegation	3.55 (0.70)	3.26 (0.75)	4.06***	< .001	0.40

### Mediation Analysis

Work engagement was found to partly explain the link between distributed leadership and turnover intention. Even after accounting for engagement, distributed leadership still had a meaningful direct effect on turnover intention, showing that it works in more than one way both by making staff feel more engaged in their work, and through other means such as a stronger sense of being valued and supported by the institution. Roughly half of the overall effect of distributed leadership on turnover intention worked through engagement.

**Table 6**

*Mediation Analysis: Work Engagement as Mediator of the DL–Turnover Intention Relationship*

Path	B	SE	$\beta$	t / z	95% CI
DL → Work Engagement (a path)	0.85	0.06	.54	14.17	[.73, .97]
WE → Turnover Intention (b path)	-0.40	0.05	-.36	-8.00	[-.50, -.30]
DL → TI direct (c')	-0.43	0.07	-.30	-6.14	[-.57, -.29]
DL → TI total (c)	-0.77	0.05	-.54	-16.78	[-.87, -.67]
Indirect: DL → WE → TI	-0.34	0.05	—	—	[-.43, -.25]
Proportion mediated (PM = 44%)	—	—	—	—	[.33, .55]

### Moderation Analysis

Three factors changed the strength of the link between distributed leadership and turnover intention. University sector mattered most: distributed leadership had a noticeably stronger effect on reducing turnover intention among private university faculty than public university faculty, suggesting that shared leadership is especially valuable where job security is lower. Gender also played a role, with female faculty showing a stronger protective effect from distributed leadership than male faculty. Finally, faculty with more years of early-career experience benefited more from distributed leadership than those in their first year or two, suggesting that staff need some time in the institution before they can fully take part in and benefit from shared leadership.

**Table 7**  
*Moderation Analysis: Sector, Gender, and Experience as Moderators of the DL–Turnover Intention Relationship*

Moderator / Interaction	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p
Mod. 1: University Sector (0=Public, 1=Private)					
Distributed Leadership (DL)	-0.67	0.06	-.47	-11.17	< .001
DL × Sector	0.28	0.08	.19	3.50	.001
DL on TI: private faculty	-1.01	0.08	-.71	—	< .001
DL on TI: public faculty	-0.61	0.08	-.42	—	< .001
Mod. 2: Gender (0=Male, 1=Female)					
Distributed Leadership (DL)	-0.67	0.06	-.47	-11.17	< .001
DL × Gender	0.19	0.09	.13	2.11	.036
DL on TI: female faculty	-0.95	0.08	-.67	—	< .001
DL on TI: male faculty	-0.71	0.08	-.49	—	< .001
Mod. 3: Experience (years, centred)					
Distributed Leadership (DL)	-0.67	0.06	-.47	-11.17	< .001
DL × Experience	-0.03	0.01	-.12	-2.07	.039

## Discussion

### Distributed Leadership and Turnover Intention

The close association with distributed leadership and low turnover intention supports the fact that the structure of leadership is highly important in determining the desirability of young academic employees to remain. This was sufficient in size to be similar, or even larger, than the impact of a supportive supervisor, one of the most established predictors of staff retention in the broader research literature.

In the distributed leadership, shared decision-making and trust and delegation were the most significant factors. This aligns well with the concept of Self-Determination Theory that the most crucial psychological need of motivation is autonomy, or the feeling of having a real choice and control. Faculty members of Generation Z who feel empowered to make decisions and feel trusted and given real responsibility are much less likely to consider leaving than those who work under the strictly top-down management.

### Work Engagement: a Mediator

Work engagement was found to have an impact on turnover intention approximately half as large as the total impact of distributed leadership and had no significant direct impact on turnover intention that could be attributed to engagement. This implies that distributed

leadership operates in two pathways, that is, it enables staff to feel more energised and more engrossed in their job, but also creates a sense of being supported and valued by the institution, which affects staying intentions, independent of the day to day interaction.

Practically, this implies that initiatives to enhance retention by increasing engagement on its own, such as wellness programmes or recognition schemes, etc, will tend to only realise a portion of the benefit potential. To have the greatest possible impact on Generation Z retention, universities must alter the real operation of leadership and decision-making, rather than the perceptions of staff concerning their day-to-day activities.

### **Differences by Sector, Gender, Experience**

The observation that distributed leadership is more important in the context of private universities is understandable in light of the fact that the staff of a private sector feel less secure in their jobs: where permanent employment fails to offer a sense of security, participative, supportive leadership culture becomes an even greater incentive to remain.

The gender result that female faculty are more likely to gain when in distributed leadership is consistent with broader data that women tend to react especially effectively to collaborative leadership approaches. Within the Pakistani context, where women scholars might encounter other professional obstacles, authentic leadership can be applied in two ways: to facilitate retention on a larger scale, as well as to curb the waste of female academic potential, on a smaller scale.

The finding experience indicates that new faculty might not be in a position yet to leverage shared leadership opportunities because of the institutional knowledge and relationship required. This indicates that there is a use of organized onboarding that assists new employees to grasp and participate in how their university decides on matters early in their professions.

### **Key Findings Summary**

- Distributed leadership is closely associated with reducing the turnover intention among Generation Z faculty members, and shared decision-making and trust and delegation are the most significant factors.

Work engagement is sufficient to explain about half of this effect, the rest of which occurs via other mechanisms, including a sense of institutional support.

The impact is higher in privately-run universities, in faculty that is female, and in faculty with several years of tenure.

### **Conclusion**

This paper offers eloquent proof that the way leadership is designed is relevant in retaining young academic employees in Pakistani universities. Gen Z faculty are no longer content to seek higher pay or reduced workloads (though those are crucial) but real participation in the running of their institutions.

Universities where the decision making is shared, the actual responsibility is delegated, the collaborative efforts are encouraged, and a sense of proprietorship is developed send a powerful message to the newest employees that it is worth remaining. Since the scale of the Pakistani higher education staffing issue is quite large, it might be among the most cost-effective measures that universities can make the leadership structure redesigned in terms of authentic participation, as opposed to the use of one-off consultation exercises. The advantages seem to be most pronounced in privately-operated universities and among women and more senior early-career faculty, indicating where this practice can make the most impact initially.

## Recommendations

### For University Leadership

The departments are to integrate authentic faculty engagement in daily decision-making processes on curriculum, course distribution, research focus, and recruiting instead of consulting as a ritualistic procedure once decisions are reached. Introduction of the new generation Z staff to the mechanics of shared decision-making must be organized, preferably with more experienced staff members that can guide them through these procedures, early on, and make them realize and engage in the process.

### For Institutional Policy

Measures of the participative nature of the leadership of a university could be usefully included in higher education quality frameworks, alongside e.g. measures of research and teaching quality. The support and advice on developing more participative governance in addition to the current performance-centred focus of private universities might be especially useful, especially as the advantages of distributed leadership seem to be the most evident in this context.

### For Future Research

Longitudinal research should be conducted on the faculty in the future to determine whether distributed leadership lowers actual departures rather than intentions to quit. It would also be useful to compare the results with other South Asian systems of higher education to determine the extent to which these patterns are generalized outside of Pakistan.

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