Exploring the Role of Departmental Heads in Motivating University Teachers toward Learner-Centered Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The shift toward learner-centered teaching has become a central goal of higher education reform; however, the adoption of constructivist pedagogy remains uneven in many universities of Punjab, Pakistan. Recognizing the pivotal role of academic leadership in facilitating pedagogical change, this study examined how departmental heads motivate university teachers to transition from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered teaching. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten departmental heads working in public sector universities of Punjab. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: the central role of teachers' intrinsic motivation, the motivating influence of collaborative professional environments, the importance of guidance-oriented leadership and supportive feedback, the need for meaningful professional development with follow-up, and the role of institutional resources in sustaining innovative teaching practices. The findings indicate that while intrinsic motivation serves as the primary driver of pedagogical change, its sustainability largely depends on leadership practices and institutional support structures. Departmental heads who foster trust, collaboration, mentoring, and practical support create conditions that encourage teachers to engage with learner-centered pedagogy more confidently and consistently. The study concludes that effective motivational leadership, rather than directive supervision, is essential for sustaining pedagogical reform in higher education. The findings offer valuable implications for leadership development, policy formulation, and professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening learner-centered teaching practices in university contexts.

Keywords: *Motivational strategies, leadership. traditional teaching practices, Role, Heads, constructivist pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

The transition toward learner-centered teaching has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education systems operating within a global knowledge economy. Modern societies increasingly require graduates who can think critically, collaborate effectively, solve complex problems, and adapt to rapidly changing professional contexts. As a result, teaching and learning processes are expected to move beyond traditional content delivery and instead emphasize active engagement, inquiry, reflection, and knowledge construction (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Learner-centered and constructivist pedagogies are therefore widely regarded as essential for preparing students to participate meaningfully in postmodern social and economic environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In Pakistan, educational reforms have

acknowledged these global demands by revising teacher education curricula to promote constructivist approaches. The B.Ed. (Hons) curriculum 2016, for example, emphasizes critical thinking, cooperative learning, project-based work, and reflective practices as core pedagogical principles. These reforms place substantial responsibility on university teachers particularly teacher educators to enact learner-centered teaching in higher education classrooms. Research indicates that such pedagogical approaches support the development of advanced cognitive skills, including creativity, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and evaluative thinking, which are essential for meaningful learning and professional competence (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Gray, 1997; Ping et al., 2018; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). Despite strong policy endorsement and theoretical support, the adoption of learner-centered teaching remains inconsistent in many universities, especially within developing contexts. Studies suggest that entrenched institutional cultures, limited pedagogical autonomy, rigid assessment structures, and resistance to change continue to reinforce traditional, teacher-centered instructional practices (Zareen et al., 2014; Korthagen, 2017; Fullan, 2016). Transitioning to learner-centered teaching therefore represents not merely a methodological adjustment, but a profound shift in teachers' professional beliefs, identities, and classroom authority. Within this reform context, departmental heads occupy a strategically significant position. As immediate academic leaders, they influence departmental culture, teaching priorities, professional expectations, and faculty motivation. Leadership research increasingly recognizes motivation as a critical mechanism through which leaders shape employee behavior and performance. Rather than relying solely on external incentives, contemporary views of motivation emphasize individual differences, internal drives, and the alignment of personal and organizational goals (Arslan, 2018). Departmental heads who understand these dynamics are better positioned to encourage teachers to engage with pedagogical innovation.

Psychological perspectives conceptualize motivation as a process involving the initiation, direction, and sustained regulation of behavior toward desired outcomes (Beckers et al., 2019). In educational institutions, motivated teachers are more likely to demonstrate commitment, professional confidence, and willingness to experiment with new teaching approaches. Motivation also contributes to positive work environments by fostering voluntary cooperation, shared purpose, and effective use of teachers' expertise, ultimately enhancing organizational productivity and educational quality (Bergamin et al., 2019). Effective academic leadership thus requires creating conditions that enable teachers to feel supported, valued, and professionally empowered. Scholars argue that leaders who provide opportunities, recognition, and meaningful professional engagement can significantly influence teachers' motivation and instructional practices (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Bater & Jordan, 2017). In developing countries such as Pakistan, where higher education institutions face resource constraints and hierarchical structures, the motivational role of departmental heads becomes particularly crucial for sustaining learner-centered teaching initiatives (du Toit-Brits, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Although learner-centered teaching is strongly advocated in higher education policies and teacher education curricula in Pakistan, classroom practices in many universities continue to reflect predominantly traditional, teacher-centered approaches (Noreen & Rana, 2019; Shah, 2019; Zareen et al., 2014). This persistent reliance on lecture-based instruction raises concerns about the effectiveness of pedagogical reforms aimed at fostering critical thinking, student engagement, and applied learning. While teachers' skills and qualifications are important, research suggests that performance is equally influenced by motivation and willingness to embrace change. A key challenge lies in the limited understanding of how departmental heads motivate university teachers to move toward learner-centered teaching. Existing research has largely focused on teachers' beliefs or general leadership styles, with comparatively little attention given to the specific motivational strategies employed by departmental leaders within higher education settings. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical evidence examining how these strategies operate within the unique

organizational and socio-cultural context of Pakistani Public sector universities, where traditional academic norms, workload pressures, and assessment practices often discourage pedagogical experimentation. Without a clear understanding of how departmental heads influence teacher motivation, efforts to promote learner-centered teaching risk remaining largely symbolic and policy-driven rather than practice-oriented. The absence of systematic evidence on leadership-driven motivation limits the ability of institutions to design effective leadership development programs and support mechanisms for pedagogical change. Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate the role of departmental heads in motivating university teachers toward learner-centered teaching, with the aim of informing leadership practices, institutional strategies, and sustainable pedagogical reform in higher education.

Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objective:

1. To explore the role of departmental heads in motivating university teachers toward learner-centered teaching practices.

2. To identify context-specific recommendations for strengthening leadership practices that support learner-centered teaching in universities.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do departmental heads perceive their role in motivating university teachers toward learner-centered teaching?

2. What leadership practices can be strengthened to promote sustained learner-centered teaching in universities?

METHODOLOGY

For this inquiry, the researchers adopted an interpretive paradigm to explore the complexities of the research questions. Unlike traditional scientific models that seek a single, objective "truth," the interpretive framework acknowledges that a single phenomenon can be perceived and experienced in a multitude of ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective is rooted in the belief that social reality is not a fixed, external object; rather, it is a fluid and evolving construct shaped by human dialogue, cultural backgrounds, and personal viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). So, researchers used a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivational role of departmental heads in promoting learner-centered teaching. This approach is appropriate for exploring perceptions, experiences, and leadership practices within real institutional contexts, where complex human interactions and meanings cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. The participants of the study comprised 10 departmental heads (including Heads of Departments and Chairpersons) working in public sector universities of Punjab. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only those holding direct academic leadership positions with responsibility for teaching and faculty development were included in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences, perspectives, and leadership practices in their own words. An interview guide was developed focusing on themes such as leadership roles, motivational strategies, support mechanisms, challenges, and institutional context. Follow-up probing questions were used to elicit deeper insights where necessary. The collected data were

analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Braun et al., 2019). This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and key themes related to motivational strategies and leadership practices influencing learner-centered teaching. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequence.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The given data explained the role of departmental heads in motivating university teachers toward learner-centered teaching in public sector universities of Punjab. Five main themes were emerged from this data are described below:

1. The Core of Inner Motivation

A majority of heads emphasized that intrinsic motivation is a foundational element in sustaining professional commitment and encouraging the use of constructivist teaching practices. They viewed internal drive as more enduring than external incentives, noting that personal growth, self-satisfaction, and a sense of purpose largely determine instructional effort.

According to one of the Head,

> *"At the end of the day, it's about my own standards. I don't need a plaque on the wall to try a new teaching method; I do it because I want to see my students succeed and because I want to grow as a professional. Even if no one notices, I know I'm doing better today than I was yesterday." (H2)*

Similarly another participant reported that,

> *For me, the motivation comes from that internal 'click'—the feeling that I owe it to my students and myself to keep evolving. Even when the school doesn't say 'thank you,' my own sense of responsibility keeps me moving forward."(H10)*

Some participants acknowledged that appreciation and visible outcomes can reinforce motivation; however, they stressed that reliance solely on institutional rewards is insufficient. Others highlighted that intrinsic motivation is a personal attribute that enables educators to persist and improve even in the absence of formal recognition.

2. The Power of Collaboration

Participants reported that collaboration among teacher educators plays a significant role in enhancing motivation and instructional improvement. They noted that sharing experiences, strategies, and challenges with colleagues fosters confidence and encourages experimentation with new teaching approaches.

One of the participant stated that,

> *"Teaching can feel like being on an island. But when we actually sit down and talk about what's failing or what's working, that's when the magic happens. Seeing a colleague try something new gives me the 'permission' and the courage to experiment in my own room."(H1)*

In the same way another head explained that,

> *"There is something so empowering about knowing I'm not alone in my struggles. When we share our failures and our little wins in the breakroom, it gives me the spark to try something different. It's that healthy comparison not to compete, but to get inspired by what's happening in the classroom next door."(H8)*

In the same way a head also voiced his opinion that collaborative environments were also seen as promoting self-belief and healthy professional comparison, whereas isolation and lack of interaction were perceived as barriers to progress and innovation.

3. Guidance, Not Control (Feedback & Counseling)

Some participants emphasized that monitoring of teaching practices should focus on guidance rather than control.They also valued heads of departments who acted as mentors rather than "policemen." They explained that constructive feedback from academic heads helps educators identify areas for improvement and refine their instructional methods. When feedback is delivered through supportive dialogue, it encourages reflection and gradual improvement, thereby motivating teachers to adopt more effective classroom practices.

A head explained his point of view that,

> *"I don't want a supervisor who just checks boxes. I want someone who sits with me, listens to my struggles, and offers a way forward. When my head of department talks to me as a peer and offers genuine guidance, it makes me want to work harder because I feel supported, not watched."(H5)*

4. Meaningful Growth & Follow-Up

A few participants pointed out that structured professional development activities can motivate teacher educators to improve their teaching. They suggested that workshops, seminars, and training programs expose teachers to new ideas and methods, which can stimulate interest in learner-centered approaches. However, they also implied that such activities are effective only when they are relevant and responsive to teachers' instructional needs.

A head emphasized the need of professional development activities in this way,

> *"Do not just give us a workshop and leave us to figure it out. If the training doesn't help me with my specific classroom problems, I lose interest. We need someone to check back in with us a month later to see how the implementation is actually going and to help us troubleshoot."(H4)*

Similarly another participants reported that,

> *"We have all been to seminars that feel like a checklist. But the ones that actually change how I teach are the ones that are followed up by real-world support. Don't just show me a new theory; stay with me while I try to use it in my classroom. Without that follow-up, even the best ideas eventually just gather dust."(H7)*

5. Practical Support: Observation & Resources

A small number of participants highlighted that adequate institutional resources are essential for motivating teachers to adopt constructivist practices. They explained that activity-based and learner-centered teaching requires appropriate materials and facilities. In the absence of such resources, teachers may find it difficult to implement innovative methods despite their willingness and motivation. As a head explained her narrative that,

> *"I want to use activity-based learning, but I need the materials to do it. It's also about the culture— I'd love to watch my peers teach to pick up tips, but it has to feel safe, like a learning opportunity rather than an inspection. If the resources and the trust are there, the innovation follows."(H6)*

In the similar way another head stated that,

> *"I have all these great ideas for student-centered activities, but then I look at   my   empty cupboards or the rigid seating, and it's discouraging. It's hard to   stay motivated to innovate when you're fighting against your own physical   environment. We need the administration to meet our passion with the actual resources we need to do the job."(H2)*

FINDING

The study identified five primary themes that influence how teacher educators engage with innovative practices. The findings suggest that while internal factors are the catalyst for change, the sustainability of that change is dictated by the quality of leadership and institutional support.

1. The most significant finding is that inner motivation serves as the "engine" for   long-term commitment. Participants view teaching excellence not as a job requirement, but as a facet of their personal identity.

2. The findings indicate that Peer-to-Peer Interaction is the most effective way to build professional confidence.

3. The study finds that the constructive feedback is only effective when delivered via supportive dialogue. When a head acts as a counselor, teachers are more likely to admit to struggles and seek help.

4. The study reveals that motivation drops significantly when there is no follow-up mechanism. Teachers perceive unsupported training as a burden rather than an opportunity.

5. The study highlights that there is a direct link between institutional resources and the adoption of constructivist (activity-based) teaching. Without materials, the will to innovate eventually fades.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and interrelated ways in which departmental heads influence university teachers' motivation to adopt learner-centered teaching practices. The analysis reveals that motivation toward pedagogical innovation is not driven by a single factor; rather, it emerges from the interaction between teachers' inner dispositions and the leadership and institutional environment in which they work. This aligns with contemporary views that pedagogical change is as much a human and psychological process as it is a technical or instructional one (Fullan, 2016; Korthagen, 2017). The most

prominent theme to emerge from the data is the centrality of intrinsic motivation. Participants consistently described inner drive, personal standards, and a sense of moral responsibility as the primary forces sustaining their commitment to learner-centered teaching. Teaching excellence was framed not as a compliance requirement but as an extension of professional identity. This finding resonates with self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and purpose as key drivers of sustained motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While external recognition and appreciation were acknowledged as reinforcing factors, participants clearly indicated that such incentives alone are insufficient to sustain meaningful pedagogical change. In contexts where institutional rewards are limited or inconsistent, intrinsic motivation appears to function as the foundational "engine" for long-term engagement with innovative teaching practices. The findings further highlight the power of collaboration as a motivational force. Peer-to-peer interaction emerged as a critical mechanism through which teachers gained confidence, reduced professional isolation, and developed the courage to experiment with learner-centered strategies. Participants described collaborative spaces as sources of reassurance, inspiration, and informal learning. This supports existing research suggesting that professional learning communities and collegial dialogue play a vital role in fostering reflective practice and instructional improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Conversely, isolation and lack of interaction were perceived as significant barriers to innovation, reinforcing the idea that pedagogical change is more sustainable when it is socially supported rather than individually imposed. Another important theme relates to leadership feedback, specifically the distinction between guidance and control. Participants strongly favored departmental heads who acted as mentors and counselors rather than supervisors focused on compliance. Constructive feedback, when delivered through respectful dialogue and genuine concern, was found to encourage self-reflection and professional growth. This finding aligns with instructional leadership literature, which emphasizes trust, relational leadership, and dialogic supervision as essential for motivating teachers to improve practice (Bush, 2020). When feedback was perceived as evaluative or punitive, motivation diminished; however, when it was experienced as supportive, teachers were more willing to acknowledge challenges and seek improvement. The theme of meaningful professional development and follow-up further underscores the importance of sustained leadership engagement. Participants expressed frustration with one-off workshops that lacked relevance to classroom realities and were not followed by ongoing support. Training initiatives were viewed as motivating only when they addressed teachers' specific needs and included follow-up mechanisms such as mentoring, classroom support, or reflective dialogue. This finding reinforces critiques of traditional professional development models and supports calls for job-embedded, continuous learning approaches that bridge theory and practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Finally, the findings draw attention to the role of practical support and institutional resources in sustaining learner-centered teaching. While motivation and leadership encouragement were necessary, they were not sufficient in the absence of adequate materials, flexible learning spaces, and a culture of trust around classroom observation. Participants emphasized that repeated efforts to innovate without material support eventually led to frustration and motivational decline. This finding echoes research suggesting that structural and material conditions significantly shape teachers' capacity to enact constructivist pedagogy (Zareen et al., 2014; Ping et al., 2018). Collectively, these findings suggest that while intrinsic motivation initiates pedagogical change, its sustainability depends heavily on leadership practices and institutional support systems. Departmental heads act as critical mediators between teachers' internal commitment and the broader organizational environment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of departmental heads in motivating university teachers toward learner-centered teaching in public sector universities of Punjab. The findings demonstrate that motivation for pedagogical change is primarily rooted in teachers' intrinsic drive, professional identity, and sense of purpose. However, the endurance of this motivation is shaped by leadership practices that foster

collaboration, provide supportive feedback, ensure meaningful professional development, and offer adequate institutional resources. The study concludes that departmental heads play a pivotal role not by enforcing change, but by creating conditions in which change becomes psychologically safe, professionally meaningful, and practically feasible. Teachers are more inclined to adopt learner-centered practices when they feel trusted, supported, and connected to a community of practice. In contrast, when leadership is perceived as controlling, professional development lacks follow-up, or resources are insufficient, motivation to innovate diminishes over time. Ultimately, the transition toward learner-centered teaching in higher education cannot be sustained through policy directives or isolated training programs alone. It requires leadership that recognizes the human dimensions of change and actively nurtures teachers' motivation through relational, contextual, and resource-sensitive strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Departmental heads should acknowledge and support teachers' internal commitment by promoting autonomy, professional trust, and reflective practice, rather than relying solely on external rewards.

2. Universities should institutionalize peer collaboration through regular dialogue sessions, peer observation opportunities, and professional learning communities to reduce isolation and encourage shared learning.

3. Feedback mechanisms should emphasize guidance, counseling, and professional dialogue. Departmental heads should be trained in mentoring and coaching approaches rather than compliance-based supervision.

4. Workshops and training programs should be aligned with teachers' classroom needs and supported by follow-up activities such as mentoring, reflective discussions, and implementation support.

5. Institutions should ensure the availability of instructional materials, flexible classroom arrangements, and a non-threatening culture of classroom observation to enable learner-centered teaching.

6. Higher education authorities should design leadership development programs that focus on motivational leadership, change management, and the psychology of teacher motivation within local contexts.

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