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GENDER, COMMUNICATION STYLE AND ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP: EXAMINING MANAGERIAL PATTERNS IN OPEN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Leadership effectiveness in open and distance higher education institutions, which often have complex technology-embedded governance structures, depends heavily on the communication patterns of their academic managers across diverse administrative and academic networks. The intersection of academic leadership, gender, and communication style is a critical area of investigation, particularly within open and distance learning institutions. This study investigates the gender based differentials in communication styles of academic managers in Open Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan. 224 academic managers (Heads of Departments, Program Coordinators, and Courses Coordinators) from 1 Public sector and 2 private sector universities were selected through Multi-Stage Cluster Random Sampling. This study is based on Situational Leadership Theory, and the Communication Styles Inventory for Academic Managers (CSIAM) was used after piloting and validation to collect data. Semi-structured interviews of academic managers confirm that communication styles directly inform leadership practices and managerial strategies. Findings revealed that the differences in communication styles of male and female managers were not statistically significant in both directive and collaborative clusters. Both female and male academic managers showed hybrid communication patterns in open and distance higher education institutions in Pakistan, suggesting that governance structures and organisational roles are more powerful antecedents of communication styles as compared to the gender identity of academic managers. This study recommended further exploration of the intersection of communication styles, quality assurance and enhancement, and organisational culture in the field of higher education management.

Keywords: Gender, communication style, organisational structures, academic manager, open higher education institution, collaborative- relational cluster, directive-structured cluster, expressiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of those very critical aspects having a remarkable bearing upon performance, effectiveness, and quality of an organisation (Chen, 2008; Jerab, 2024; Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Communication in an organisation is the most important and one of the most dominant activities in organisations. Survival and functioning of the organisation depend upon the effective relationships of individuals and groups in the organisation, and it is communication that establishes and maintains relationships. Not only do relationships grow through communication, but strong organisational competencies are also enacted and developed (Musheke, 2021). Communication refers to the behaviour of a person, either verbal or non-verbal, and thus encompasses the whole life of a person (Angelakis et.al., 2023; Musheke & Phiri, 2021). The role of communication in an organisation cannot be underestimated. The truth is that organisations are totally reliant on communication, and without communication, organisations would not function. The necessary condition for an organisation to be vibrant, successful, and effective is thorough, accurate, and timely communication within the organisation (Chen, 2008).

In open and distance higher education, communication assumes even greater significance due to geographically dispersed campuses, technology-mediated coordination, and multi-layered administrative structures. Recent research on leadership in online and flexible learning institutions indicates that communicative competence, relational transparency, and digital interaction skills are central predictors of leadership effectiveness (Guri-Rosenblit, 2024). Open universities require hybrid communication patterns that combine clarity in regulatory compliance with participative engagement across regional centres and virtual platforms. Gendered communication patterns may therefore shape how leaders navigate digital governance, manage distributed teams, and sustain quality assurance systems.

Some recent studies demonstrate that gender continues to shape communication practices, leadership trajectories, and governance participation within higher education institutions. Drawing on role congruity and social role perspectives, communal expectations associated with women (e.g., empathy, collaboration, and participative dialogue) and different expectations associated with men (e.g., decisiveness and assertiveness) affect leadership behaviours and governance practices. Although there is a notable increase in the representation of women in academia globally, their representation in senior managerial and leadership roles remains disproportionately low, particularly in the strategic decision-making bodies such as executive councils and university senates (UNESCO, 2023). These structural under-representations limit their access to communicative power within institutional systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In any organisation, communication plays a very important role. To a large extent, an organisation is communication (Jerab 2024). Communication is a key to the functioning of an organisation, and whether effective or not, it takes place constantly in any organisation. Núñez et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of communication in any organisation by concluding:

...that the issue of organisational communication is essential to understand and enhance the functioning of organisations, and that with the number of available investigations, this importance is not done justice (p.1209)

In higher education institutions, academic managers possess the key critical position. Contemporary research in higher education elucidates the significant role of academic managers in achieving learning outcomes, ensuring quality teaching, and enhancing institutional performance. Academic leadership is increasingly considered a multidimensional construct dealing with faculty development, quality assurance mechanisms, and curriculum management within higher education institutions (Aquino, 2025). Effective academic leadership in higher education institutions highly depends upon the communication approaches adopted by leaders. Studies highlight how effective academic leaders mostly rely on adaptive, transparent, and relational communication patterns to facilitate



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collaboration, build trust, and support participatory decision-making in contemporary complex academic environments (Anwar & Saraih, 2024). They continue to argue that in digitally mediated academic contexts, communication has become even more critical to managerial effectiveness, enhancing institutional responsiveness, shaping knowledge sharing, and building emotional intelligence.

Academic leadership practices, with the emergence of distributed and digital leadership, have been further transformed, particularly in institutions with open and distance learning (ODL) systems. Recent scholarship indicates that driving performance in complex, digitally mediated higher education institutions depends upon digital leadership competencies such as flexibility, collaborative orientation, and technological proficiency (Hamzah, 2025). Moreover, sufficient empirical evidence is available to support the notion that institutions offering ODL possess complex systems operating across geographically dispersed areas, calling for timely, effective communication to all stakeholders, relying heavily on collaborative decision making and using communication technologies for coordination of academic activities, administrative tasks, and quality assurance processes (Guri-Rosenblit, 2024; Singh & Sharma, 2023). Effective communication, for ODL institutions, is a key mechanism for academic managers to facilitate academic tasks, ensure good governance, and achieve institutional goals (Petriglieri et al., 2025).

Within the context of higher education, communication styles are linked to various leadership orientations, a directive approach that emphasises clarity, task completion, and accountability, whereas a collaborative approach focuses on shared understanding, participative dialogue, and cooperation (Banks et al., 2018; Bolden, 2016). Moreover, empirical investigations also indicate that these styles are not independent entities, and academic leaders often integrate structured and relational behaviour patterns to manage governance responsibilities and meet quality assurance expectations (Shattock, 2023). Despite numerous studies highlighting the multifaceted nature of leadership communication, encompassing multiple styles like openness, relational, assertiveness, and dominance, leadership communication in the ODL context is still an underexplored area (Hoch et al., 2018; Men, 2021).

Academic leadership, communication, and gender are other significant intersections, particularly in the context of ODL, as researchers have historically investigated whether female and male managers differ in their communication styles and leadership practices (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt & Murphy, 2023; Onekywere, 2020). Some previous studies noted that female managers were more open in communication and had participatory communication styles, whereas male managers were more assertive, possessing directive communication styles. Contemporary meta-analyses challenged these deterministic assumptions by identifying role expectations, organisational norms, and contextual influences as stronger predictors of communication styles (Eagly et al., 2020; Post et al., 2025). A very recent study by Angelakis et al. (2023) concluded a notable difference in the communication styles of male and female managers, where female managers demonstrated more positive communication than their male counterparts. Although the debate on gender differences in communication styles is not new, it remains an evergreen area of research interest.

Despite growing research on gender and leadership in higher education, limited studies explicitly integrate gender, communication style, and governance effectiveness within open university systems. Existing scholarship often examines these variables independently or within conventional campus-based institutions, and the empirical investigations available show inconsistent results. Most of the inquiries tend to study communication patterns alone, neglecting the indispensable intersection of gender, governance, and communication styles, particularly in the context of ODL institutions. Existing work often treats gender and leadership separately or within traditional campus settings, leaving a gap in understanding how gendered communication patterns shape managerial behaviour and quality assurance outcomes in open higher education governance. Consequently, there remains a theoretical and empirical gap in understanding how gendered communication patterns influence managerial governance practices and quality assurance outcomes in open and distance higher education contexts. Addressing this gap contributes to both gender equity scholarship and governance reform discourse by positioning communication style as a mediating mechanism between gender and institutional performance. As an attempt to fill this empirical gap, the present study addressed the following research question:



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1. RQ1: What dominant communication styles characterise academic managers in Open Higher Education Institutions?
2. RQ2: How do communication style clusters relate to leadership orientation?
3. RQ3: To what extent does gender influence communication styles within academic leadership roles?
4. RQ4: What are the managerial and governance implications of identified communication style clusters?

This study tested the following null hypotheses to statistically prove the differences based on gender in various communication styles clusters of academic managers:

1. HO₁ No significant difference exists between male and female academic managers in collaborative communication styles.
2. HO₂ There is no significant difference in male and female academic managers in directive communication styles.
3. HO₃ There is no significant difference in male and female academic managers in expressive communication styles.

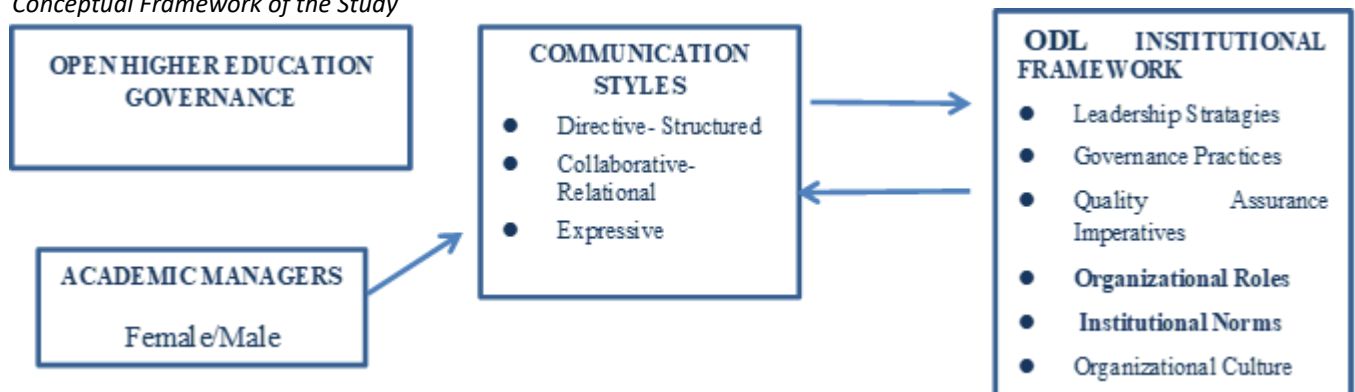
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, communication styles of academic leaders are conceptualised along two distinct primary dimensions: collaborative-relational (relationship-oriented) and directive-structured (task-oriented), and a hybrid communication pattern is represented as expressive communication that is neither too directional nor too relational. These communication patterns are theoretically grounded in various leadership behaviour models and particularly driven by Situational Leadership Theory. Figure 1 explains how these distinct communication clusters reflect leadership practices within the institutional framework in open higher education institutions.

Conceptual framework of the study suggests that communication styles are both shaped by and actively shape multiple institutional factors, including governance practices, leadership strategies, organisational roles, institutional norms, quality assurance imperatives, and organisational culture. Relational and directive communication styles influence decision making, academic engagement, and coordination while operating within these organisational structures of open higher education institutions and are simultaneously reinforced by organisational cultural contexts and institutional expectations. Furthermore, the gender of academic managers is conceptualised as a critical factor influencing communication patterns and leadership dynamics within open higher education institutions, thereby providing an additional lens to understand variations in leadership communication patterns.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study





RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-method design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to investigate gender differences in communication styles and leadership implications of these styles among academic managers in open and distance higher education institutions in Pakistan. This design allowed for triangulation of quantitative data collected through surveys and qualitative data from in-depth interviews, providing both generalizable findings and rich contextual insights into how communication styles relate to governance practices, quality assurance processes, and organisational norms.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised all academic managers, including Heads of Departments, Program Coordinators, and Course Coordinators across universities offering ODL programs in Pakistan. These managers are responsible for managing academic activities, coordinating with faculty, instructional designers, IT staff, and students, and evaluating courses and teaching quality. At the time of the study, there were 749 academic managers across two public-sector and four private-sector universities.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed:

1. Cluster Sampling: Each university was considered a cluster. To ensure proportional representation, 1 public-sector and 2 private-sector universities were randomly selected.
2. Simple Random Sampling: Within the selected universities, representative academic managers were randomly drawn. Approximately 30% of the population (224 managers) were selected, of whom 203 participated, yielding a 90% response rate.

Table 1

Gender Distribution of The Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	139	68.47	68.47
Female	64	31.53	100.0
Total	203	100.0	

3. For the qualitative component, 20 academic managers were purposefully selected from the survey respondents for semi-structured interviews, ensuring diversity in institutions, gender, experience, and leadership roles.

Research Instrument

For the identification of communication styles of academic managers, an adaptive version of the Communication Style Inventory for Academic Managers (CSIAM) was applied. The instrument was adapted from Norton's (1983) original communication style constructs to suit the academic leadership context in Pakistan. The CSIAM included 50 items measuring nine communication styles: Open, Friendly, Argumentative, Impression-Leaving, Dramatic, Attentive, Precise, Dominant, and Animated.

Before data collection, the instrument was pilot-tested to ensure psychometric suitability in the Pakistani academic context. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.79 to 0.88, confirming internal consistency.



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Factor Analysis and Cluster Identification

To identify the interrelated nature and underlying structure of different communication styles, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted. For factor analysis, Principal Axis Factoring with oblique (Promax) rotation was applied. Keeping in view the assumption that these communication styles are not orthogonal, but rather interrelated, this approach of factor analysis was appropriate. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test to ensure sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were done before analysis. The analysis revealed two primary clusters:

- Collaborative–Relational Cluster, encompassing relational–transparent and expressive styles (Friendly, Open, Animated, Attentive).
- Directive–Structured Cluster, encompassing assertive and structured styles (Precise, Dominant, Impression-Leaving, Dramatic, Argumentative).
- Expressive Communication Cluster; encompassing animated and impression-making styles

These clusters were then used to classify communication orientations of academic managers and further examine gender differences and governance patterns.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple channels, including personal visits by the researcher, email correspondence, and support from colleagues affiliated with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations

Standard ethical considerations were taken into account. Before the collection of data, informed consent from all participants was obtained by clearly informing them about the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, the use of their responses solely for research purposes, and their right to withdraw their participation at any stage. In order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect identities. No identifying information, like names, specific positions, or institutions, was disclosed in the data analysis or reporting.

Collected data were stored securely and were accessed only by the researcher. Ethical rigour was also ensured by efforts to minimise researcher bias, especially in qualitative data analysis, by accurately representing participants' views and maintaining objectivity. Institutional norms were respected properly, and necessary permissions were sought before data collection. Throughout the process, it was ensured to follow ethical guidelines to uphold the principles of transparency, integrity, and respect for participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, mean comparisons, and factor analysis, linking communication styles to leadership orientation and gender. Factor analysis facilitated the identification of collaborative–relational and directive–structured clusters, which were then compared across male and female respondents. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis.



Table 2
Typology of Communication Styles of Academic Managers

Style	Mean	Std. Deviation
Friendly	3.454	1.295
Open	3.615	1.053
Argumentative	3.047	.992
Attentive	2.926	.850
Dramatic	2.433	.678
Precise	3.161	1.077
Dominant	3.281	.840
Impression Leaving	3.101	1.058
Animated	2.939	.496

A typology of communication styles was developed based on descriptive statistics. Table 2 shows that friendly and open communication styles were the most dominant communication styles of academic managers, with mean values of 3.45 and 3.61, respectively. These communication styles indicate a relational- transparent orientation of the academic managers. Academic managers were found to possess a moderate level of assertive-structured orientation, with dominant and precise communication styles indicated by mean scores of 3.28 and 3.16, respectively. Argumentative and animated communication styles were also endorsed moderately, and the dramatic communication style was the least preferred style of academic managers. Overall, this typology suggests that in open and distance learning institutions, academic managers demonstrate a hybrid governance orientation exhibited by their communication styles combining structural assertiveness with relational openness.

Gender-Based Differences in Communication Styles of Academic Managers

In order to answer research question 3, Null hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested.

Table 3
Differences in Collaborative Communication Styles of the Academic Managers on the basis of Gender

Style	Respondents	N	Mean	S.D	t	Mean Difference	SE _D	p																					
Friendly	Male	139	3.88	.87	-0.763	-0.64	.1704	>.05																					
	Female	64	3.42	.91					Open	Male	139	3.46	.94	-1.34	-0.31	.164	>.05	Female	64	3.77	.89	Attentive	Male	139	2.83	.860	-1.71	-0.19	.151
Open	Male	139	3.46	.94	-1.34	-0.31	.164	>.05																					
	Female	64	3.77	.89					Attentive	Male	139	2.83	.860	-1.71	-0.19	.151	>.05	Female	64	3.02	.857								
Attentive	Male	139	2.83	.860	-1.71	-0.19	.151	>.05																					
	Female	64	3.02	.857																									

Note. df= 201

Table 3 demonstrates a comparison of male and female academic managers' communication styles that are



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collaborative in nature. Independent sample t-test values show that no statistically significant difference exists in these styles based on gender. Male managers reported a higher score on Friendly communication style ($M= 3.88$, $SD=.87$) as compared to female academic managers ($M= 3.42$, $SD= .91$), but this difference was not significant at the .05 level. A slightly higher mean score was demonstrated by female academic managers on open communication style ($M=3.77$, $SD=.89$) as compared to male managers ($M=3.46$, $SD= .89$), yet this difference was insignificant. Similarly, male academic managers reported a higher score for animated communication style ($M=3.02$, $SD= .74$), and their score on attentive communication style was comparatively lower than that of female academic managers ($M=2.83$, $SD= .86$), but these differences remain statistically insignificant with a p-value being greater than .05.

Table 4
Gender-based Differences in Directive Communication Styles of the Academic Managers

Style	Respondents	N	Mean	S.D	t	Mean Difference	SE _D	p
Argumentative	Male	139	3.18	.755	.426	.17	.131	>.05
	Female	64	3.01	.721				
Dramatic	Male	139	2.43	.290	-.156	-.001	.051	>.05
	Female	64	2.44	.287				
Precise	Male	139	3.22	.894	.871	.13	.155	>.05
	Female	64	3.09	.827				
Dominant	Male	139	3.43	.369	-1.102	-.28	.065	>.05
	Female	64	3.15	.364				

Note. $df= 201$

Table 4 exhibits the analysis of directive communication styles of academic managers. Data revealed that no statistically significant differences were found between male and female academic managers in directive communication styles. However, male managers reported slightly higher mean scores in argumentative communication styles as compared to female academic managers ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .755$ and $M = 3.01$, $SD = .721$) respectively, but the difference was not statistically significant. A negligible gender difference was noted in the Dramatic communication style ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .290$ for male managers and $M = 2.44$, $SD = .287$ for female managers). Male academic managers reported marginally higher scores in precise communication style ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .894$) than female managers ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .827$), though this difference was not statistically significant ($t = .871$, $p > .05$).

For a more authority-oriented style, like a dominant communication style, male academic managers reported a higher mean score ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .369$) as compared to female academic managers ($M = 3.15$, $SD = .364$), yet the difference was non-significant ($t = -1.102$, $p > .05$).

Table 5
Gender based Differences in Expressive Communication Styles of the Academic Managers

Style	Respondents	N	Mean	S.D	t	Mean Difference	SE _D	p
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Impression	Male	1	3.147	.913				
Leaving	Female	6	3.050	.937	-1.221	-.097	.161	>.05
Animated	Male	1	3.02	.7413				
	Female	2	2.86	.7093	1.30	.161	.129	>.05

Note. df= 201

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

To explore implications of communication style clusters for governance and managerial strategies, semi-structured interviews of 20 academic managers were conducted. Participants represented Course Coordinators, Heads of Departments, and Program Coordinators from both public and private sector higher education institutions offering ODL programs. Interviews explored the implications of their communication styles as revealed in surveys, situational adaptations, leadership behaviours, and organisational influences. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, ensuring the extraction of patterns to answer research questions.

Data analysis disclosed interrelated themes aligned to the communication styles clusters, including directive–structured, collaborative–relational, and hybrid clusters as identified in factor analysis. These themes reveal multiple managerial and governance implications, particularly in ODL contexts.

Relational–Collaborative Communication Leads towards Participatory Governance

Academic managers consistently highlighted that participatory governance in education, and particularly in the ODL context, is highly desirable, and relational-collaborative communication, including openness, attentiveness, and friendliness, plays a key role in fostering a sense of belonging, resulting in participatory governance. Collaborative communication styles were believed to be critical for encouraging dialogue, facilitating coordination by building trust among management, faculty, students, instructional designers, and IT support staff. Some managers pointed out that relational communication not only helps in conflict resolution and problem-solving but also facilitates collective decision-making, which is an essential component for distributed leadership in higher education institutions dealing with open learning environments.

I try to ensure participation by involving everyone in discussions. For me, transparency and trust are crucial and must be ensured, especially when our students and faculty are diverse and spread across multiple locations.

Participants were of the view that leaders who use relational-collaborative styles can easily and effectively create a culture of collaboration in organisations; they can mobilise teams and keep everyone motivated to work for a shared vision. One participant emphasised that open, friendly, and attentive communication styles are essential to support engagement in academic decision-making and inclusive governance.

Directive–Structured Communication Ensures Policy Compliance and Accountability

Academic managers pointed out that though relational- collaborative communication is considered desirable in many ways, directive-structured communication is also a necessity when it comes to enforcing institutional policies, maintaining clarity, and ensuring quality assurance practices. Quality assurance compliance, one of the participants stressed, can never be achieved without managers being directive and structured in communication. This cluster of communication styles, like dominance, argumentativeness, and precision, was considered an essential mechanism for ensuring adherence to academic standards, administration of programs, and evaluation of faculty.

There are certain times and situations when you must be precise, firm, and clear. Clear directions and instructions ensure true compliance by preventing misunderstandings and meeting deadlines in completing tasks as per institutional policies.



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Another governance implication believed by the academic managers when using directive–structured communication is that it strengthens accountability mechanisms and ensures operational efficiency. Academic managers believe that directive communication not only supports regulatory compliance but also complements the collaborative communication cluster, thus a balanced leadership can be maintained in open and distance higher education institutions.

Expressive Communication as a Strategic Leadership Tool

Participants consistently argued that expressive communication styles, such as impression-leaving and animated interactions, are highly effective when employed contextually and strategically. Managers unanimously described these communication behaviours as crucial for enhancing engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm, particularly in initiatives requiring student and faculty engagement and participation.

Animated communication is occasionally helpful in energising the faculty by highlighting important initiatives and sensitising them about various issues, but it must be balanced with precision and professionalism.

Expressive communication patterns function mainly as a bridging mechanism between directive and relational clusters. This supports a hybrid leadership and governance style that simultaneously ensures compliance and fosters engagement.

Organisational and Contextual Shaping of Communication

Participants emphasised, across clusters, that professional protocols, governance norms, and institutional structures significantly shaped communication styles. Academic managers unanimously reported that official hierarchies, organisational culture, digital coordination platforms, and governance experiences primarily influenced their choices of applying directive, collaborative, or expressive communication patterns. It was interesting to find out that even personal preferences of academic managers for being open or expressive in communication were moderated by organisational culture and governance requirements. One participant pointed out:

Our communication patterns are guided more by university procedures and less by our personal style or preference. University role and protocol set boundaries, yet within that, we adapt as needed.

These findings highlight that communication styles are contextually adaptive behaviours rather than individual traits only, and these governance frameworks, managerial responsibilities, and institutional standards shaped adaptive behaviours.

Integration with Governance and Managerial Implications

Qualitative data analysis revealed direct insights into the governance and managerial implications of the identified clusters:

- Academic managers communicate in the style corresponding to the collaborative-relational cluster to ensure trust building, facilitate participatory governance, and create team cohesion.
- Communication styles corresponding to the directive-structured cluster help managers ensure policy adherence, accountability, and operational clarity. Academic managers use this cluster for strengthening quality assurance mechanisms and institutional governance.
- Expressive communication patterns, when applied by the academic managers, enhance motivation and engagement. This cluster acts as a strategic complement that bridges direction and collaboration.
- Academic managers believe that a hybrid application of these clusters is necessary for effective academic leadership in open higher education. Academic managers need to ensure adaptive, context-sensitive communication as a strategic mechanism for balancing structure and collaboration to meet managerial and governance demands.



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In summary, the qualitative analysis demonstrates that communication styles directly inform governance practices and managerial strategies. Academic managers in open education institutions who strategically adapt their communication are better positioned to promote institutional compliance, along with managing distributed academic operations. Gender differences in communication styles were minimal, reinforcing that the role and context of leadership, rather than gender, drive the adoption of communication clusters in open higher education institutions in Pakistan.

Triangulation was conducted through linking factor-analysis-derived clusters and mean-based typologies from the CSIAM with interview narratives. Quantitative data identified dominant communication patterns and clusters, while qualitative insights contextualised these patterns, revealing situational, organisational, and governance implications. The combined analysis confirmed a hybrid collaborative-directive communication orientation, with minor and non-significant gender differences, demonstrating that leadership communication is influenced more by institutional expectations and governance structures than by gender.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated gender differences in communication styles among academic managers in open and distance higher education institutions in Pakistan. The findings reveal that academic managers predominantly adopt a hybrid communication pattern, integrating directive-structured styles (e.g., argumentative communication, dominance, and precision) with collaborative relational-communication styles (e.g., attentiveness, openness, and friendliness). On the other hand, expressive communication styles, including impression leaving and animated styles, serve supplementary functions. Factor analysis also confirmed these three primary communication clusters: directive, structured, and collaborative-relational. This identification aligns with contemporary leadership models that emphasise both participative and task-oriented communication. It seems essential to note that this was a cross-sectional study collecting data at a single point in time. Though this approach was suitable and efficient to achieve study purposes, it has its own limitations in drawing causal inferences or tracking changes in communication patterns over a period of time. In educational leadership, communication practices may evolve in response to organisational roles, institutional reforms, external pressures, and technological advancements; such dynamics could not have been captured. Moreover, the study was based upon self-reported data that may inherently possess response biases like subjective interpretation and social desirability, etc., though all efforts were made to ensure clarity and anonymity to obtain valid responses.

The present study was confined to open higher education institutions of Pakistan, representing a specific geographical context with limited generalizability of the findings to other higher education systems and regions. As communication styles are often influenced by socio-political environments, cultural norms, and institutional policies, all these factors may vary significantly across systems and regions. Therefore, care should be taken in extending the findings beyond similar educational and institutional settings. Despite certain limitations, the study has many notable findings. No statistically significant gender differences were identified between the communication styles of male and female academic managers in open and distance higher education institutions; these clusters were consistent, although minor mean variations were observed.

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews further substantiated these quantitative results. Academic managers confirmed that they consciously adjust their communication styles per organisational norms, situational demands, and governance requirements. Participants highlighted the significance of these communication clusters by emphasising that relational-transparent communication facilitates participatory governance, trust, and engagement. Whereas directive-structured communication styles are also essential for policy compliance, clarity, and quality assurance mechanisms within complex institutional settings of HEIs offering ODL programs. Expressive communication styles, on the other hand, were identified as a context-dependent, strategic tool for articulating vision and motivating teams. Discussing the factors shaping or affecting communication styles,



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interviewees reconfirmed quantitative findings of insignificant differences in communication styles based upon gender by indicating that organisational structures such as digital communication platforms, formal reporting, governance norms, and quality assurance protocols are the factors that significantly shape the communication patterns of academic managers in HEIs.

Although the present study did not find significant gender-based differences in communication styles among academic managers, several previous research studies provide a nuanced explanation of how gender may interact with managerial communication patterns in an organisational context. Studies in both educational and business settings have indicated that female leaders are often perceived as more participative, democratic, and relational in their communication styles, while male leaders are more likely to adopt assertive or directive communication styles (Carli & Eagly, 2011; Rosette & Tost, 2010). A notable study of managerial communication styles conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) concluded that female managers were found to be more engaged in inclusive and supportive discourse, which positively affected team cohesion but led to perceptions of lower decisiveness. Whereas male managers' communication styles were frequently associated with control and assertiveness, potentially enhancing authority but with the risk of reduced relational engagement (Koenig et al., 2011; Paustian-Underdahl, 2024).

In some recent studies, Hoyt and Murphy (2023) reported that while gender differences in communication may exist, their effects on leadership performance are context-dependent, and mainly influenced by leader role expectations, organisational culture, and sectoral norms. In a more recent study, Witoszek-Kubicka and Rudziński (2025) argued that gender differences in communication styles are diminishing because of the changing professional role expectations that increasingly demand hybrid communication patterns with a blend of directive and relational elements. These insights are fully aligned with the findings of the present study, suggesting that governance demands, organisational role expectations, and quality assurance imperatives in open higher education institutions may supersede traditional gendered communication patterns.

The convergence of quantitative data and qualitative narratives supports a view of managerial communication patterns that are adaptive, contextually shaped, and oriented toward both accountability and collaboration. This hybrid orientation of communication is consistent with transformational and distributed leadership frameworks, emphasising that effective leaders must balance assertiveness with transparency to support shared governance, manage distributed academic operations, and uphold quality assurance standards in open higher education contexts. Overall, while gender still can influence communication patterns in some contexts, the present study found that in open higher education governance, communication styles are primarily shaped by professional role requirements and institutional demands, with gender exerting a minimal effect.

Findings of the present study suggest that the communication styles of the academic managers have significant implications for leadership and governance practices in the context of ODL institutions. Adoption of a relational-transparent communication approach characterised by attentiveness, openness, and friendliness encourages trust, dialogue, and faculty involvement in decision-making, thus facilitating participatory governance. In open higher education institutions with shared and participatory governance structures, relational communication patterns support transparent exchange of ideas, leading towards distributive leadership practices. These findings confirm the results of many previous research studies that open and friendly communication by academic leaders improves stakeholders' trust and engagement and promotes inclusive decision-making within higher education institutions (Bolden, 2016; Raza et al., 2024). These relational-transparent communication practices are particularly important in ODL institutions where academic managers coordinate with dispersed teams mostly using digital platforms.

Academic managers, both male and female, sometimes prefer to use directive—structured communication patterns to ensure effective policy implementation. These communication styles emphasise precision, clarity, and dominance that help academic managers in ODL institutions to implement institutional policies across programs and departments. Research in the context of academic leadership shows directive communication is often essential in organisations for ensuring policy compliance, accountability, and achievement of organisational goals while



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maintaining quality standards (Antonakis et al., 2022). Findings of the present study confirm that in ODL institutions where academic managers have to coordinate and communicate with multiple stakeholders, including students, faculty, technical staff, and instructional designers, structured and directive communication supports operational efficiency and timely decision-making. Overall, the findings propose that effective academic leadership in ODL institutions requires a balanced hybrid communication pattern that integrates a structured communication approach with relational transparency to strengthen governance and encourage participatory coordination (Flander et al., 2025).

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of leadership patterns and communication styles of academic managers in open and distance higher education institutions in Pakistan. The findings revealed that academic managers predominantly adopt a hybrid communication style, integrating relational-collaborative behaviours such as friendliness, openness, and attentiveness, with directive-structured behaviours including dominance, precision, and argumentative communication. Expressive communication patterns serve as supplementary tools for motivation, engagement, and influence. Factor analysis confirmed the presence of two primary clusters: directive-structured and collaborative-relational, supporting the typology of communication styles with one additional cluster encompassing expressive communication styles. Importantly, in the present study, gender was found to have no statistically significant effect on communication styles, although minor variations in mean scores were observed. Both female and male academic managers showed similar hybrid communication styles, suggesting that governance structures, organisational roles, and institutional norms play a stronger role in shaping managerial communication than gender identity. Insights from qualitative data reinforced these findings, indicating that managerial communication styles are contextually adaptive, with academic managers adjusting communication according to institutional culture, situational demands, and quality assurance requirements.

These study findings offer important implications for open higher education institutions by highlighting the centrality of communication patterns as strategic leadership tools for governance and quality assurance. Firstly, the findings underscore how academic managers should develop the competencies to adapt communication patterns and navigate between assertive-structured orientations and relational-transparent as per the requirements of directive clarity and collaborative engagement. Study suggests that governance effectiveness in open higher education is increasingly contingent upon context-sensitive communication styles that align with stakeholder expectations and institutional goals. Secondly, in institutional governance in ODL institutions with decentralised structures and digitally mediated interactions, there is a need for robust communication mechanisms. Leaders and policymakers should focus on the development of communication protocols and frameworks that promote accountability, transparency, and inclusivity. Participatory governance mechanisms can be used to institutionalise relational communication, whereas structured communication can be strengthened through standardised reporting systems, clear policy guidelines, and accountability measures. Thirdly, the study suggests that an effective quality assurance system in an open higher education context largely depends not only on formal procedures and standards but also on how these are interpreted and communicated by academic managers. Directive communication styles support satisfactory compliance with regulatory requirements and quality benchmarks, while relational communication styles facilitate stakeholder engagement, feedback, and continuous improvement. Therefore, ODL systems should ensure that communication competencies are embedded within quality assurance frameworks by ensuring that academic managers are proficient in balancing a developmental and compliance-driven approach to quality assurance and enhancement.

Finally, the findings provide valuable implications for leadership development programs for academic managers. Drawing upon the absence of gender differences in communication styles, coupled with the effectiveness of hybrid communication patterns, suggests that leadership training programs should move beyond traditional gender-based programs and focus on strengthening communication adaptability, digital leadership, and emotional intelligence. Based upon study conclusions, the following recommendations are made:



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- To ensure participative decision-making and compliance with institutional policies in the open higher education sector, training programs for academic managers should emphasise the development of adaptive hybrid communication skills enabling managers to balance directive clarity with collaborative engagement.
- Since communication patterns proved to be primarily role-driven rather than gender-driven, professional development programs and organisational policies should focus on developing adaptive leadership strategies and functional competencies rather than emphasising gender-specific approaches.
- Digital coordination platforms, institutional norms, and hierarchical structures play a significant role in shaping communication. Universities, particularly those offering ODL programs, should design organisational frameworks and communication channels that encourage both transparency and engagement of all stakeholders who are geographically dispersed.

It is suggested that further research can be conducted to construct observation-based measures along with the standardised inventories of the different communication styles employed by the academic managers in universities of Pakistan to get first-hand knowledge and avoid common method bias. Future researchers may also consider the exploration of the potential factors that may hinder or facilitate the development of certain communication patterns of academic managers in higher education institutions.

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