

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pro-student governance in academic institutions: Behavior shift from students' expectation versus reality on academic institution services

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the psychological dimensions of governance in higher education institutions, focusing on how students' perceptions and experiences shape their behavior and engagement. Through a qualitative exploratory design, the study investigates the impact of governance practices on student trust, motivation, and participation, drawing on Social Comparison Theory, Reactance Theory, and Attribution Theory. The study, conducted with 40 students in the Philippines, reveals that students perceive governance as effective when it is transparent, inclusive, and responsive to their needs. Conversely, rigid and unresponsive governance leads to frustration, disengagement, and a sense of alienation. The findings highlight the importance of aligning governance practices with student expectations to foster a supportive and thriving academic environment. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating perspectives from other stakeholders, such as faculty and administrators, to further refine and enrich our understanding of effective governance in higher education.

Keywords: Pro-student governance; academic institutions; behavior shift; students' expectation; reality; academic institution services

1. Introduction

In academic institutions, governance serves as a vital connection between institutional policies and student engagement, profoundly shaping the educational experience. However, governance extends beyond its structural function—it operates as a psychological dynamic that significantly impacts students' behavior, trust, and participation. Positive interpersonal relationships within educational contexts have been shown to enhance enthusiasm for learning, contributing to sustainable academic success and self-confidence^[1,2]. This research delves into the underexplored psychological dimensions of governance, employing Social Comparison Theory, Reactance Theory, and Attribution Theory to provide deeper insights into how students perceive and respond to institutional governance. By aligning these theories with lived experiences, the study highlights the pivotal role governance plays in fostering engagement or driving disengagement and dissatisfaction.

Expectations significantly influence students' perceptions, particularly as they compare their institution's governance with their ideal standards or the governance practices of other institutions.

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Governance in academic settings is often underexplored, especially in terms of student involvement in university department leadership^[3]. Social Comparison Theory explains how individuals assess themselves by evaluating various aspects of their lives against others, shaping motivations for self-improvement and behaviors^[4]. In governance, such comparisons often intensify disillusionment when institutional practices fall short of students' expectations. Effective leadership, which inspires students to align their efforts with shared goals, hinges on ethical behavior and accountability^[5]. Leaders who exhibit these traits encourage students to internalize them, ultimately fostering greater public service motivation^[6]. The alignment of governance practices with student expectations, as this theory suggests, is critical for maintaining trust and active participation within the institution.

Rigid or unresponsive governance can evoke feelings of restriction among students, leading to frustration or defiance, as explained by Reactance Theory. Reactance arises as a motivational response to perceived threats to one's freedom, with its intensity dependent on the importance of the threatened autonomy and the extent of the perceived threat^[7]. This research illustrates how rigid governance undermines students' sense of autonomy, leading to disengagement and diminished value in their academic environment. Studies also highlight the significance of inclusive decision-making processes, emphasizing student voices and their role in shaping governance and the teaching-learning process^[8]. Resistance to unresponsive governance is not passive; it manifests in reduced motivation, limited participation, and a widening gap between students and institutional leadership. To counteract these reactions, governance must adopt flexible and collaborative models that foster inclusion and responsiveness.

Attribution Theory, particularly its focus on the locus of control, provides insight into how students interpret governance outcomes. This theory examines the perceived causes of successes and failures, considering their antecedents and consequences^[9]. Students who perceive governance as externally controlled—dominated by administrative systems that exclude meaningful student input—often disengage and attribute institutional shortcomings to systemic failures. On the contrary, governance structures that involve students in decision-making and emphasize shared accountability promote ownership and constructive engagement. Modern higher education increasingly incorporates active learning techniques to boost student engagement and foster better outcomes, aligning with such governance models^[10].

This exploration of psychological dimensions aims to address the gap between governance practices and student expectations. By highlighting the importance of transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness, the study emphasizes the necessity of trust and collaboration in institutional governance. It encourages academic leaders to prioritize strategies that cater to the psychological and academic needs of students, ensuring a supportive and thriving academic environment for all stakeholders.

2. Literature

Governance within academic institutions plays a crucial role in influencing students' perceptions, behaviors, and engagement levels. A system that prioritizes inclusivity, transparency, and collaboration fosters trust and encourages active participation among students. Collaborative governance involves various stakeholders engaging in collective decision-making processes across multiple levels of public agencies and institutions^[11]. However, when institutional practices fall short of student expectations, feelings of frustration, disengagement, and dissatisfaction often arise. Research highlights those unmet expectations regarding college experiences can undermine student persistence, whereas alignment between expectations and reality fosters satisfaction and increases the likelihood of persistence until graduation^[12,13]. This study examines governance through psychological lenses, exploring how students' perceptions of leadership and decision-

making influence their experiences and behaviors. Adaptive strategies, such as maintaining open communication, have been found to mitigate some challenges in institutional governance^[14].

Social Comparison Theory explains that individuals evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, which can significantly influence their perceptions^[15]. This theory offers insights into how students judge their institution's governance relative to their expectations or the practices of other institutions. Often, students assess factors such as policies, inclusivity, and responsiveness to determine whether their needs are being met. As education policies evolve towards inclusivity, comparisons with institutions perceived as more effective may lead to dissatisfaction and reduced trust^[16]. Alternatively, governance that exceeds student expectations fosters motivation, engagement, and a sense of belonging, strengthening their connection to the institution. Engagement and belonging are central to students' experiences, with each concept reinforcing the other and contributing to a thriving academic environment^[17].

Reactance Theory provides a lens to understand students' resistance to governance structures perceived as restrictive or unresponsive. Psychological reactance emerges when individuals feel their autonomy is threatened, motivating them to restore their freedom^[18]. In the context of governance, restrictive practices may lead students to exhibit defiance or reduced participation, often driven by feelings of being ignored or undervalued in decision-making processes. Conversely, governance that listens to student voices and promotes flexibility creates a collaborative atmosphere that empowers and encourages active participation. Conflict resolution plays a vital role in fostering positive relationships between students, teachers, and parents, as unresolved disputes can result in systemic dysfunction and adverse outcomes for all stakeholders^[19-22]. Despite its importance, many schools' conflict management strategies remain outdated and misaligned with modern challenges^[23,24].

Attribution Theory, particularly its locus of control concept, sheds light on how students interpret the outcomes of governance practices. This theory examines the cognitive processes individuals use to make sense of events by attributing causality^[25]. Students who perceive governance as externally controlled, with limited student involvement, often attribute institutional shortcomings to systemic flaws, resulting in disengagement. In contrast, governance models emphasizing shared responsibility and decision-making foster collective efforts, building trust and encouraging active participation. Effective governance entails leadership practices that create processes, systems, and management strategies aimed at ensuring institutional sustainability and accountability^[26].

The gap between students' expectations and reality highlights the psychological impact of governance. Students often expect governance to be inclusive, transparent, and centered on their well-being. Educational leadership, particularly from principals and administrators, has the potential to transform learning environments and improve students' overall experiences^[27,28]. When these expectations are not met, students may feel alienated, undervalued, and less willing to engage with the institution. Bridging this gap requires governance models that align with expectations while actively involving students in decision-making processes, fostering trust and a sense of belonging.

The Importance of understanding the psychological dimensions of governance cannot be overstated, particularly in addressing issues of student success and retention^[29]. By integrating transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness, governance can effectively address student concerns while cultivating a collaborative and thriving academic community. Such approaches ensure that students feel valued, empowered, and engaged, contributing positively to their academic journey and the institution's overall success.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to capture the complex, nuanced perspectives of higher education students on governance practices. This approach was informed by the work of Castro et al.^[30] and Velasco^[31], which emphasizes the importance of exploring subjective experiences and psychological dimensions. The study focused on how governance practices affect students' trust, engagement, and motivation, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Social Comparison Theory, Reactance Theory, and Attribution Theory. These frameworks provided a lens to understand the psychological processes influencing student responses to governance, helping to reveal underlying motivations, perceptions, and behavioral shifts. The qualitative design was intentionally chosen to explore these complex phenomena in depth, as it allows for the discovery of insights that cannot be easily captured through quantitative methods.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study involved 40 students enrolled in various higher education institutions across the Philippines. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who had firsthand experience with institutional governance. This approach allowed for the inclusion of students who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research objectives. Participants represented a diverse range of academic programs (e.g., Business, Engineering, Arts) and year levels (from first-year to final-year students). This variation ensured that the sample reflected different perspectives on governance and engagement, addressing the concern that students' views might differ based on their academic discipline, year of study, and level of involvement in governance processes.

The purposive sampling method was chosen to capture a broad range of student experiences, including those actively engaged in governance activities, such as student councils or committees, and those less involved. The sample thus represented a diversity of opinions, ensuring that the data collected would be comprehensive and varied.

3.3. Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary data collection tool, following best practices in qualitative research^[32]. The interview questions (shown in **Table 1**) were designed to align with the study's objectives and theoretical framework, aiming to explore students' perceptions, expectations, and experiences related to governance. Open-ended questions encouraged in-depth responses and allowed students to share their views freely, without being limited to predefined answers. The interview guide underwent expert review to ensure its appropriateness and relevance. The final interview questions were designed to capture a broad spectrum of opinions, not just the most common or popular ones, as pointed out by the reviewer. This helped ensure that the qualitative exploration remained comprehensive.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

| Research Questions | Interview Guide Questions |
|---|---|
| What are higher education students' impressions of governance in their academic institutions? | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. As a learner, what is your idea of a higher education institution in terms of governance? Explain further.2. Do you think the students' behavior change based on the way the higher education institution govern? Explain further.3. Are there specific services you expect from higher institution to do ideally for students? Elaborate more why these services are important. |

| Research Questions | Interview Guide Questions |
|--|---|
| How do students perceive the shift in their behavior based on expectations versus reality on institutional services? | 4. Based on your reflection, how do the students view the institution in terms of their governance based on your expectation and what happens in reality? Elaborate your views. |
| | 5. Can the manner of governance change the behavior of the higher education learners? Explain what are. |
| | 6. Realistically, in what ways should governance be done to effect positive behavior change to learners? Explain further. |

Table 1. (Continued)

3.4. Data gathering procedure

The data collection process involved conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews with selected participants in private, comfortable settings to ensure a relaxed environment conducive to open and honest conversation. Participants were fully informed about the study's aims and procedures, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews. The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for the purpose of the study. Interviews were audio-recorded with the explicit consent of the participants, who were encouraged to provide specific examples and detailed accounts of their experiences with governance in their institutions.

To protect participants' confidentiality, all personal identifying information was anonymized, and the data was securely stored. Participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences. This ensured that their participation was voluntary, and they could leave the study if they chose to do so at any point during the process.

Additionally, the researchers took measures to ensure a diverse range of views were captured, including from students with varying levels of involvement in governance activities. This was essential to ensure that the sample accurately reflected the full spectrum of student experiences and not just those from highly engaged students. The ethical principles outlined in institutional and national ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study, maintaining the integrity and respect for all participants involved.

3.5. Scope and delimitation

This research focused on exploring the psychological dimensions of governance within higher education institutions in the Philippines, specifically through the lens of students' perceptions and experiences. The study did not include insights from administrators or other stakeholders, thereby providing a focused but limited perspective. While the qualitative approach offered rich insights into student experiences, it did not capture the broader scope of governance across institutions. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives and employing mixed-method methodologies to enhance generalizability. The methodology outlined a systematic approach for investigating governance practices in higher education, with particular attention to the psychological factors influencing student experiences and behaviors.

3.6. Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Savellon et al.^[33] was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in the interview data. The process began with a thorough review of the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. The initial step involved open coding, where key concepts and phrases were manually identified. The researchers then grouped these codes into broader categories reflecting themes related to governance practices and the psychological theories underpinning the study.

The final themes were refined and interpreted within the context of the research objectives and the theoretical framework. Themes that emerged included transparent decision-making, inclusive governance, student-centered services, and the psychological impact of poor governance. Thematic analysis helped ensure that the full spectrum of student opinions was represented, addressing the concern of focusing too heavily on the most common responses.

4. Results

Research Objective 1. Determine the students' impression of what governance is in higher education institution.

Question 1. As a learner, what is your idea of a higher education institution in terms of governance? Explain further.

1.1. Fair and transparent decision-making

A majority of respondents (n=12) agreed on the importance of fairness and transparency in governance. These students felt that transparent decision-making processes were crucial for fostering trust and accountability within the institution. Several students emphasized that articulated policies and clear institutional actions could safeguard their interests and promote a positive academic environment. This transparency, they argued, would ensure that decisions are made equitably, supporting both students' learning and growth.

“In my opinion, good governance in higher education means fair and transparent decision-making, involving students, faculty, and staff. Everyone should have a voice, and decisions should be made with openness to ensure accountability.”

“Governance in a college means setting fair rules and managing them transparently to help students learn and grow. When policies are clear and equitable, students feel secure and supported.”

However, a few respondents (n=5) also expressed concern about the apparent disconnect between governance ideals and the reality they experience, highlighting that while they valued transparency, it was sometimes perceived as lacking or not fully implemented in their institutions.

“Sometimes decisions are made, but we don't really know how or why they were made. Transparency is important, but it's not always clear in practice.”

“I feel like some decisions could be made clearer, especially when it comes to academic policies. We need more open discussions about why things are changing.”

1.2. Collaborative and student-inclusive governance

Respondents (n=9) emphasized the importance of collaboration and student inclusion in governance. Many students voiced that governance should not be a top-down process but should actively involve students, especially in decisions that directly affect their educational experience, such as curriculum design, academic policies, and resource allocation. The inclusion of students in governance was seen as vital for promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility, as well as fostering stronger engagement with the institution.

“A learner would like to see governance that is collaborative, involving students in decisions like curriculum development and resource distribution. This helps ensure that student needs are met effectively.”

“Governance should provide opportunities for students to give feedback and participate in decision-making processes. When students feel included, they develop a stronger connection to the institution.”

On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents (n=3) noted that while inclusion is important, they believed that certain decisions needed to be made by administrators and experts, as students might not always be equipped to make decisions on complex institutional matters.

“I think it’s great to have student input, but there are times when only the administration or experts should make the final call, especially on things like budgets or complex regulations.”

“Students should be heard, but some decisions just need to be handled by those in charge. Not everything can be decided by a vote.”

1.3. Governance as responsive and adaptive

Several respondents (n=7) highlighted that governance should be responsive to the evolving needs of students. They felt that governance systems should be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances, such as shifts in student demographics, technological advancements, or evolving societal expectations. When students perceived governance as being reactive and attuned to their needs, they reported feeling more supported and motivated in their academic endeavors.

“Governance should be adaptable, responding quickly to changes in student needs. For instance, new policies should be put in place to address issues like mental health or online learning.”

“When the institution responds to issues raised by students, it shows that they care about our well-being. This motivates us to stay engaged.”

A few students (n=4) voiced frustration with governance that seemed rigid or slow to adapt, feeling that their concerns were not taken seriously or addressed in a timely manner.

“It often feels like the institution takes too long to address issues. If they’re not responsive, it’s discouraging for students.”

“We raised concerns about online learning during the pandemic, but it took so long for any real changes to happen.”

Question 2. Do you think students’ behavior changes based on the way the higher education institution governs? Explain further.

2.1. Positive engagement through supportive governance

Supportive governance practices, such as open communication and responsive leadership, lead to positive changes in student behavior (n=15). When students feel heard and supported, they are more likely to engage actively in their academics and extracurricular activities. Institutions that prioritize student concerns and maintain transparency foster a sense of belonging and motivation. This kind of governance creates a productive academic environment where students feel empowered and committed to their success.

“Yes, supportive governance makes students feel valued and motivates them to engage more actively. When students know their voices matter, they are more likely to take responsibility for their learning.”

“Absolutely, students behave more positively when they see that the institution listens to their concerns and acts on them. This increases participation and fosters a stronger sense of belonging.”

Despite this general consensus, a few respondents (n=6) did point out that while supportive governance can boost engagement, it depends on how effectively institutions communicate their support and whether students feel that the support is tangible and not just a theoretical ideal.

“Supportive governance can help, but it’s important that students feel the real impact. Sometimes, institutions talk about being supportive, but students don’t always see it in action.”

“Feeling supported is important, but if the support is not visible or effective, it doesn’t motivate students to engage.”

2.2. Disengagement from poor governance

Conversely, rigid and unresponsive governance can lead to frustration and disengagement among students (n=15). When institutions fail to address student concerns or lack transparency, students feel excluded and undervalued. This results in reduced participation and lower motivation to excel academically. Poor governance alienates students, making them less likely to engage with the institution or its policies.

“If governance is rigid and unresponsive, students quickly lose interest in participating. They feel ignored and undervalued, which affects their academic performance and overall motivation.”

“Poor governance makes students feel disconnected from the institution, leading to disengagement. When concerns are ignored, it’s hard to stay motivated or trust the leadership.”

However, a small number of respondents (n=5) felt that while poor governance might lead to disengagement for some, others might not be as affected and could still engage in their studies independently of governance structures.

“Some students might not be that affected by governance. They are just focused on their studies, and even if governance is poor, they continue to work hard.”

“There are students who are motivated no matter what, so governance might not be the main factor in how they behave or perform.”

Question 3. Are there specific services you expect from higher institutions to do ideally for students? Elaborate more on why these services are important.

3.1. Comprehensive student support services

Respondents (n=15) emphasized the importance of services that go beyond academics, such as mental health counseling, academic advising, and career guidance. These services are crucial for helping students navigate personal and academic challenges and preparing them for future careers. By addressing the multifaceted needs of students, institutions demonstrate their commitment to student success and well-being. Providing such support helps students manage stress, stay on track academically, and develop holistically.

“As a student, I expect mental health counseling, academic advising, and career guidance to be readily available. These services help us handle challenges effectively and ensure we’re prepared for life after graduation.”

“Institutions should offer holistic support to students. Services like mental health counseling and career advising are essential for maintaining well-being and achieving academic and professional goals.”

However, a smaller group of respondents (n=5) felt that while these services are important, their availability should be balanced with other academic-focused resources. They argued that not all students necessarily need extensive support, and that students should take more personal responsibility for seeking assistance when needed.

“I think career guidance and advising are helpful, but at the end of the day, students should take responsibility for their own future and mental well-being.”

“Some of these services may not be needed by everyone. I personally didn’t find the need for career advising, but for some students, it could make a difference.”

3.2. Efficient administrative processes

Efficient administrative processes, such as streamlined enrollment and registration, are essential for reducing student stress. Respondents (n=15) noted that these processes should be user-friendly to allow students to focus more on their studies. Access to modern facilities, such as updated libraries and technology labs, is also crucial for enhancing learning. Institutions that invest in these areas provide students with the tools they need to excel academically.

“Enrollment and registration processes should be smooth and efficient. This helps reduce unnecessary stress and allows students to focus on their studies.”

“Modern facilities like updated libraries and technology labs are essential for a productive learning experience. They provide students with the resources needed to excel.”

Nonetheless, a few students (n=5) raised concerns about the over-reliance on administrative systems. They noted that while technology can help streamline processes, it can sometimes create barriers, especially for students who are less familiar with technology or who face connectivity issues.

“Sometimes, online systems aren’t as accessible to everyone, especially for students without reliable internet access or those not as tech-savvy.”

“The technology might be efficient, but it should be made accessible to all students. Not every student is comfortable navigating the digital systems used for registration or finding resources.”

Research Objective 2. Determine the shift of behavior based on their expectations and reality on the academic institution’s services

Question 4. Based on your reflection, how do students view the institution in terms of governance based on your expectation and what happens in reality? Elaborate your views.

4.1. Gap between expectations and reality

A significant portion of respondents (n=16) reported a noticeable gap between their expectations of inclusive, transparent, and responsive governance and the reality of what they experienced. While students expect institutions to demonstrate fairness and openness, the reality often falls short due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and poor communication. Four (n=4) respondents expressed frustration over the disconnection between institutional promises and actual governance practices. As a result, the misalignment leads to

feelings of disillusionment and disengagement. To address this, institutions need to actively work on aligning their governance practices with student expectations in order to rebuild trust and encourage engagement.

“There’s often a significant gap between what institutions promise and what they deliver. This disconnect can lead to frustration and a loss of trust in the institution.”

“Students expect governance to be responsive and transparent, but the reality is often bureaucratic and slow. This makes it difficult to stay engaged and confident in the institution.”

“I expected more student involvement in decision-making processes, but what I see is a lot of delays and unclear communication. That makes it hard to stay motivated.”

4.2. Impact on trust and participation

The respondents (n=20) also noted that the gap between expectations and reality directly impacts their trust in the institution and willingness to participate in academic and extracurricular activities. Many students indicated that when their concerns are ignored or not adequately addressed, it diminishes their motivation to engage with the institution. The lack of responsiveness from governance practices leads to feelings of being undervalued and disconnected, thereby reducing students’ participation in both academic and non-academic aspects of institutional life.

“When governance falls short, students lose confidence in the institution. This affects their willingness to participate in academic and extracurricular activities.”

“A lack of responsiveness and transparency makes students feel excluded, reducing their motivation and engagement. Trust needs to be rebuilt for students to feel valued.”

“The longer students feel ignored, the less they want to contribute to the institution. It’s a cycle that erodes trust and engagement.”

Question 5. Can the manner of governance change the behavior of higher education learners? Explain what are.

5.1. Governance encourages responsibility and engagement

Inclusive and transparent governance positively influences student behavior by fostering a sense of responsibility and active participation (n=25). When students feel their voices are heard, they are more likely to engage in their studies and contribute to the institution. This approach not only improves academic outcomes but also helps build a strong sense of community and belonging. Students thrive in environments where they feel valued and involved.

“Yes, inclusive governance encourages students to take ownership of their education. It makes us feel respected and motivates us to participate actively in academic and extracurricular activities.”

“Students are more likely to engage and contribute positively when they see that their feedback is taken seriously and acted upon by the institution.”

5.2. Alienation through rigid governance

Conversely, when governance structures are rigid and exclusionary, they can lead to alienation and disengagement among students (n=15). Respondents noted that when students feel excluded from decision-making processes, they experience a sense of powerlessness, which negatively impacts their academic motivation. This lack of inclusion can result in a disconnection from the institution and reduced participation in both academic and extracurricular activities. It was emphasized that institutions with inflexible governance models risk creating an environment where students feel marginalized, and consequently, their involvement and enthusiasm for institutional life diminish.

“Rigid governance makes students feel powerless, leading to disengagement and frustration. It’s difficult to stay motivated when you feel excluded from important decisions.”

“Such governance creates a disconnect between students and the institution, reducing participation and fostering a sense of alienation.”

“When we’re not included in decisions that directly affect us, it’s hard to care about the institution or engage in anything outside of classes.”

Question 6. Realistically, in what ways should governance be done to effect positive behavior change in learners? Explain further.

6.1. Inclusive and transparent governance structures

Effective governance in higher education should prioritize transparency and active involvement of students in decision-making processes. Respondents (n=10) emphasized that involving students in governance fosters trust, accountability, and collaboration, which encourages students to take a more active role in their education. Transparent governance not only makes students feel that their opinions are valued, but it also leads to increased engagement and motivation. Institutions that include students in key governance processes demonstrate their commitment to building a supportive, student-centered academic community, where students feel empowered and included in shaping their educational environment.

“Governance should include student representatives in decision-making bodies. This fosters trust and ensures that policies reflect the needs and concerns of the student body.”

“Transparent governance helps students feel valued and encourages them to engage more actively in their academic and extracurricular activities.”

“When students are included in decision-making, they feel that their opinions matter, which positively impacts their motivation and engagement.”

6.2. Responsive and adaptive governance

Governance should be flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of students (n=30). Respondents noted that effective governance requires timely responses to student feedback and the ability to adapt policies to meet changing needs. When institutions demonstrate a commitment to addressing student concerns promptly, it builds trust and helps foster a culture of continuous improvement. This approach not only resolves issues efficiently but also ensures that governance remains relevant and responsive to the challenges students face. Institutions that prioritize responsiveness in governance create a supportive and adaptive environment that encourages students to engage fully with their academic and extracurricular experiences.

“Governance should be responsive to student feedback and adapt policies to meet changing needs. This demonstrates that the institution values and supports its students.”

“Timely responses to concerns help create a supportive environment where students feel their voices are heard and their needs are met.”

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the critical role governance plays in shaping student experiences within higher education institutions. A key theme that emerged throughout the data was the gap between student expectations and the reality of governance practices. Many students expressed a strong desire for governance that is transparent, inclusive, and responsive. However, many reported that their institutions fell short of these ideals. This discrepancy suggests a disconnect between the institutional promises of student-centered governance and the reality of bureaucratic inefficiencies, which often hinder meaningful student participation. The misalignment between expectations and reality is significant because it directly influences student trust, engagement, and academic motivation.

The findings demonstrate how governance practices in higher education institutions significantly shape students' perceptions, behaviors, and levels of engagement. This is supported by Social Comparison Theory, Reactance Theory, and Attribution Theory. Themes such as transparent decision-making, inclusivity, and the effects of governance on student engagement prominently emerged, revealing the psychological factors influencing student experiences. These results highlight the need for governance practices to address students' expectations while cultivating trust and a sense of belonging. This misalignment may explain the frustration students feel when their expectations of fairness and transparency are not met.

Furthermore, while students highlighted the importance of inclusion in governance, the data also pointed to the varying levels of participation based on students' academic programs and levels. Students who had more direct involvement in decision-making processes reported a stronger sense of ownership and engagement in their academic journey.

Social Comparison Theory provides a framework for understanding how students perceive governance as fair or unfair by comparing institutional practices to their expectations or to those of other institutions. The study found that students associated fairness and transparency in governance with increased trust, security, and motivation. Clear, unbiased, and student-focused policies were identified as essential components of effective governance. In contrast, when governance practices were perceived as overly bureaucratic or dismissive, students experienced frustration and disillusionment. For example, students expressed appreciation for governance models that involved them in curriculum design and resource allocation, as these practices promoted inclusivity and connection. This alignment of governance practices with student expectations was shown to sustain engagement and strengthen institutional trust. As Trowler^[34] observed, for some students, engaging with university life can feel like navigating a conflict due to a culture that is perceived as alienating or uninviting.

Reactance Theory sheds light on the resistance and disengagement observed when institutional governance is rigid or unresponsive. The results indicated that when students felt excluded from decision-making or their concerns were dismissed, they experienced feelings of alienation and decreased motivation. Conversely, governance models characterized by open communication and responsiveness positively influenced student behavior. Students reported feeling more valued, engaged, and motivated when they believed their voices were acknowledged, reflecting Reactance Theory's emphasis on autonomy and

collaboration as means to reduce psychological resistance. These findings align with Norliana and Khairul^[35], who highlighted that student-centered governance fosters autonomy and promotes active engagement, contributing to a supportive academic environment.

Attribution Theory, particularly the concept of locus of control, provides additional insights into how students interpret governance outcomes. The results showed that students who perceived governance as externally controlled—dominated by administrative decisions without student input—were less likely to trust the institution or participate actively. On the other hand, governance practices that emphasized student involvement and accountability fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among students. This collaborative governance approach not only enhanced engagement but also created an academic environment where students felt empowered and valued. Zitha et al.^[36] emphasized that student engagement and collaboration significantly influence learning outcomes and overall success in higher education.

The findings also underscored the psychological effects of the gap between students' expectations and the reality of governance practices. Many respondents reported frustration and disappointment when their expectations of inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness were unmet, which often led to disengagement and diminished trust in their institution. In contrast, institutions that actively included students in decision-making processes and addressed their concerns were more successful in building trust and fostering motivation. These practices demonstrated the importance of aligning governance with students' psychological needs to establish a supportive and engaging academic environment. This is consistent with Ameloot et al.^[37], who highlighted the critical role of satisfying students' basic psychological needs in enhancing trust, motivation, and engagement.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of governance in shaping students' experiences and behaviors within higher education institutions. The research provides valuable insights into how students perceive governance practices and the psychological dimensions that influence their trust, engagement, and motivation. In particular, it is evident that students expect governance to be inclusive, transparent, and responsive to their needs. These expectations are not only shaped by their desire for fair treatment but also by the importance they place on active participation and open communication within the institution.

The study further reveals that when governance practices align with student expectations, students feel valued and empowered, leading to increased academic engagement and participation in extracurricular activities. In contrast, when governance practices are rigid, opaque, or unresponsive, students experience frustration, disengagement, and a sense of alienation. This highlights the importance of adopting governance structures that foster collaboration and ensure student inclusion in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the research emphasizes that governance should be seen as a dynamic, responsive system that evolves with students' changing needs. Institutions that are proactive in addressing student feedback and adapting policies accordingly create environments that are supportive and conducive to academic success. The shift from a top-down, authoritative governance style to one that is more participatory and student-centered is key to building trust and fostering a sense of community among students.

The study also underscores the need for higher education institutions to invest in comprehensive support services—such as academic advising, mental health counseling, and career guidance—that cater to the diverse needs of students. These services play a vital role in not only supporting students' academic success but also in promoting their overall well-being, which in turn contributes to a more positive and engaged student body.

In conclusion, the research highlights the importance of aligning governance practices with the psychological and developmental needs of students. By prioritizing transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness, higher education institutions can enhance student trust, foster a supportive learning environment, and ultimately improve student outcomes. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating perspectives from other stakeholders, such as faculty and administrators, to further refine and enrich our understanding of effective governance in higher education.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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