



## Neoliberal Approach in a Developing Country: Blow in a Silent Trumpet

Mamoona Riasat\*

Muhammad Shahid Farooq†

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**Abstract:** *Academic capitalism invading higher education is considered alarming in literature. This research aims to bring about the factual picture of the neoliberal approach adopted by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) within its delimitations. The research was deductive in nature and followed a Phenomenology research design. The sample comprised thirty-two (32) participants. Data were collected through interviews and document analysis. Thematic analysis technique was used to identify Seventeen (17) sub-themes and Four (4) major themes. The research concludes that the neoliberal approach is adapted by HEC considering its need of the hour for the development of research. Yet, it is not much appreciated by the administrative and academic heads. The reason remains the nonproductive check and balance process and weak feedback loop. Leadership trainings may be conducted to emphasize the importance of higher education as a philosophy of life, not as a commodity of life, to blend social justice with market ideologies.*

**Key Words:** Neoliberalism, Quality Education, Higher Education, Quality Initiatives, Quality Agencies

### Introduction

Market system acting as a fulcrum along interconnected economic, social and political dimensions are defined by the theories of neoliberalism. In the globalized world, the capitalist markets are seen as a logical system for the provision of resources and an icon of success. With the ticking clock, globalization has become the process of deriving the output by providing the input to get the maximum profit by the industry. International free trade is the root heart of the globalization process (Tarar, 2015). Academic capitalism in Higher Education or corporate university is some common expressions used for the neoliberal approach in higher education. The term neoliberal to describe the changing university is used during the last two decades (Savage, 2017).

Neoliberalism walks with a change in liberal ideas in higher education pinned under the traditional approach of the universities. The framework of the neoliberal approach recognizes education also as a public good like any other materialistic resources as wealth, land or minerals, which can neither be worn out nor can run out by continuous redistribution. Neoliberalism, apart from being an ideology, was adopted as a way of governance in the 1970s. It emerged from rational and liberal positions embraced in education and media. The situations of the government made democracies think about the neoliberal approach as it became inevitable for the government (Golden, 2017). Countries adopting the neoliberal approach consider higher education as quasi-good. This leads to development through government, intervened by economic mergers with industry. Its intervening is considered to raise the knowledge-based economy. This paper aims to scrutinize the neoliberal approach in higher education through neoliberal reforms of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan.

\*PhD Scholar, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: [mamoona.scholar@gmail.com](mailto:mamoona.scholar@gmail.com)

†Professor, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

The Neoliberal doctrine has been introduced to Pakistan by International Financial Institutions through the government since 1988, with the claim of the road to development and decrease in poverty. Academic capitalism, racketeering, and corporatization invading higher education are alarming. Education is flourishing as a capitalist market rather than free-market demand, serving its stakeholders. The elucidation of students as consumers and faculty as the service provider is shrinking the public dimension of education practices in colleges and universities. This new panache is giving rise to the neoliberal regime, leading to the new structure of the higher education system ([Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017](#)). Neoliberalism actually aims at socializing costs, privatizing profits, and defending the incentives and threats of increasingly reduced rich minority national or international, all with the increase in more sinister consequences for the majorities and for the planet itself ([Chomsky, 1999](#)).

Socially, the market system is claimed to underpin a robust individualism that defines individual rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Politically, the theory requires the state to provide an efficient legal framework for market operations, but otherwise to confine itself to those limited functions which must be provided collectively rather than as the outcome of individual market choices ([Self, 2000](#)). [Freeman \(2018\)](#) presented neoliberalism positively and explained the interdependence between the various changes in higher education that led to what might otherwise seem like a narrow, technical crisis. Further, he defended that the neoliberal approach at least prompts us to think about the introduction of market mechanisms explaining universities.

Neoliberalism in higher education operates in many ways, and sometimes these ways are also invisible. [Foucault et al. \(2008\)](#) explain it with an example German, American, and broader Europeans have a very different history, but if we observe closely, it is found that capitalism unites them. Neoliberalism getting its base from capitalism is considered to serve diversity as in cultures and societies. Knowledge has become a powerful tool for the development of the economy. The important role played by educational institutions in the production of the knowledge economy cannot be denied. Pakistan is a developing country and has limited resources to deal with the new challenges of the economy, so the research was designed to find out the problem faced by educational institutions in the process of creating the knowledge economy ([Parveen et al., 2019](#)). A knowledge-based economy does not stand on outdated resources like only enhancing human capital and focused on labour availability but on more emphasis on education and especially productive and practical based education ([Shumway, 2017](#)). Neoliberalism direct towards the minimum involvement of the state in the governing matters and to make more room for the experimenting market processes ([Foucault, 1991](#)). [Lather \(2012\)](#) categorize the neoliberalism approach in three forms. Initially, neoliberalism was considered a blend of social justice with market ideologies. With the time reduced, public control and encouragement of privatization are recognized as the second form, while in the third form, neoliberalism is combined with free trade. Higher education is considered to be a key element required for the sustainability of societies. Higher education institutes provide leadership, business and political skills, which are important for the development of a country. Implementation of governing requirements needs to have active participation from both public and private sector. Its essentials are strong political will and financial support ([Alejandro-Cruz et al., 2019](#)). This research will be an effort to bring about the current picture of the neoliberal approach adopted by the Higher Education Commission within its delimitations.

## Review of Literature

The term neoliberalism was originally coined in 1938 by the German scholar Alexander Rustow. Neoliberalism is a rehash of Classical liberalism, not to be confused with the social liberalism that usually means liberal in the United States of America (US). Classical liberalism valued the rights and freedoms of the individual, including economic freedom, and praised free markets and limited government. Classic liberalism emphasizes the assertion of individualism, especially in the economy, freedom from government controls and restraints on individuals, operation of a natural law of supply-demand, productivity and economic progress through competition in the free market and need for practical applied science education free from church control ([Guttek, 2004](#)).

Neoliberalism has a much greater focus on free markets and free trade and little emphasis on

individual rights or freedom. The focus was on opening markets and expanding international trade. The revolution of education in relation to neoliberalism has been extensively theorized by researchers, particularly in the fields of education policy studies and sociology of education. In education, the most visible and important impact of neoliberalism is redefining schools from a market point of view. Neoliberal effects cause education emerging as a market concern rather than a social concern. Teachers are made more accountable than ever before in the neoliberal era ([Jenlink, 2017](#)). “Education is now framed and justified in policy as primarily a site for building human capital and contributing to economic productivity, from the early childhood years, right through to the tertiary level” ([Kandiko, 2010](#)).

[Foucault \(1991\)](#) represents neoliberalism as an artistic way to rule. The effects of neoliberal policies on education can be visibly evaluated as in Australia public school system, and curriculum has been redesigned by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is supported by political rationality; it's not only an ideology. The adoption of this political way is a thought path that is constructed by think tanks for the solution of concrete problems of the past ([Oleksenko et al., 2018](#)).

Classical liberal and neoliberal approach do have some similarities, but they are not the same. Classic liberalism was taken in the negative sense as the individuals need to be freed from the state power totally. At the same time, the notion of the neoliberal approach is received positively because of a joint venture of government involvement and individual freedom. The positive impact of the neoliberal approach is well received by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries over the last thirty (30) years as it portrays a balanced combination of the role of state limited with rules and laws to ensure the appropriate freedom of the individual. Moreover, in classic liberalism, an individual can practice freedom in all ways, while a neoliberal state is supposed to develop an individual with entrepreneurial skills ([El Bouhali, 2015](#)).

As [Burchell et al. \(1991\)](#) represent his point of view while differentiating the classic liberal and neoliberal approach that in classic liberal approach, the individual is motivated naturally and is supported by the government to show free-market exchanging conduct, whereas, in neoliberal approach, an artificial, entrepreneurial and competitive conduct is created in individuals to build economic rationality in them. The regulating role of government is limited in the neoliberal approach. Consumer preference and institutional wellbeing are seen through the specs of market relation in privatization. Its evasion into the public sector education is called bankruptcy into education by the gurus of education ([Ball, 1990](#)). The ascendancy of neoliberalism led to the inevitability and ultimate triumph of neoliberal economics ([Bettache & Chiu, 2019](#)).

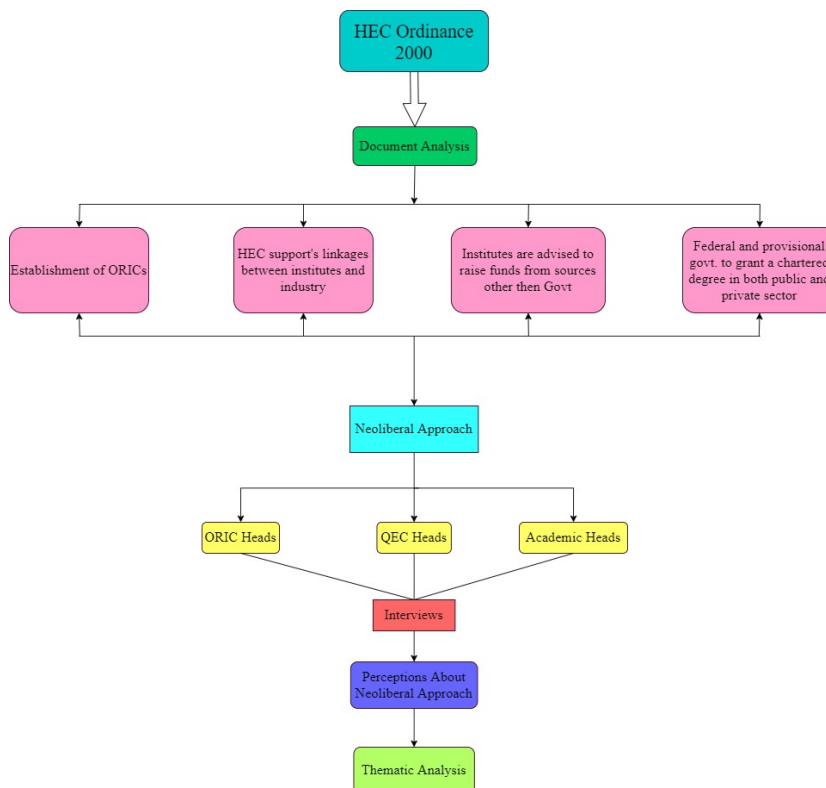
Regardless of the fact that this approach has been successful in reconstructing the policies of education, it is strongly disapproved and is suggested to be replaced. The Great Financial Crises (GFC) has played a vital role in criticizing the neoliberal approach. The criticism has been from different groups, individuals and even politicians ([Peters, 2019](#)). The introduction of quasi-market and economization of curricula can be viewed as examples of the use of the neoliberal approach. According to [Kabir \(2010\)](#), the neoliberal approach is adopted by the higher authorities in Bangladesh so that knowledge is enhanced according to the market demand in higher education institutes. However, these neoliberal reforms are not blending well with the existing system. Neoliberalism is a combination of three major components market, management and performance. In this multi-layered phenomenon, all three technologies are interrelated and interdependent. The process as a whole is worked upon and worked by to bring the change, evidently affecting the public sector. To achieve the purpose, the neoliberal policies are sold and endorsed and sometimes also forced to be adopted. The legitimization often starts with policy borrowing ([Ball, 2016](#)). Literature is equipped with empirical references of student incarceration rate, inequality in wealth and major education failures caused by the neoliberal approach inviting criticism towards itself ([Golden, 2018](#)). Lynch et al. (2012) presented the fact that neoliberal policies are being challenged at the school level due to the teacher unions, and they failed to create an impact at the classroom level.

The neoliberal policies have created an environment of competition resulting in the stratification of academic professionals in accordance to pay structure and certain academic areas of study in reference to market demand. Further, the academic professionals are treated as middle-level managers, which is

destroying the regard of a teacher (Giroux & McLaren, 2018). Zimmerman (2018) says that teacher education is challenging the democratic ways holding neoliberal approach. The instability of financial conditions and management system in higher education in Pakistan supported by the huge amount of investments from the World Bank. This is resulting in the adaptation of neoliberal policies and many other changes in the structure of universities. The neoliberal approach adapted by higher education is mainly to fulfil the research and development criteria followed worldwide by higher education. However, the impact created through these policies cannot be ignored. The authorities cannot overlook the fact that in the educational pyramid, public universities form the peak of the pyramid (Tarar, 2015). Some of the visible neoliberal reforms by HEC (Pakistan) are Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORICs), Tenure track system (TTS) and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs). The ORICs are trying to serve the stable knowledge economy and make the utmost research priority of HEC. TTTS, introduced by HEC in 2002, aims at spacing competitive academic faculty in public sector institutes for higher education for research and development of academia. Quality enhancement cells (QECs) were also established to ensure the quality of higher education and institutions (Higher Education Commission [HEC, 2015]).

### Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study has a deductive approach. The higher education ordinance (2000) document is analyzed by the researcher to extract the point in the ordinance, which clearly depict the adaptation of the neoliberal approach by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The neoliberal approach is further investigated by interviewing the ORIC heads. Further directors of Quality Enhancement Cells QECs were also interviewed to have their perceptions about the neoliberal approach of HEC. The academic heads were also part of the study as the approach is implemented by them. Their perceptions about the phenomenon gave an in-depth view of the study. The data collected by the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis using advanced software. The themes extracted portrayed the impact of the neoliberal approach.



## **Research Methodology**

The phenomenology research design of qualitative research approach is adopted by this research article. The interpretive research paradigm is followed by the researcher.

## **Population and Sampling**

The population of the study comprise all the ORIC, QEC and academic heads of public and private universities of a metropolitan city of the largest province of the country. Multistage sampling technique was adopted by the researcher. Six universities three (3) public and three (3) private universities were selected purposely. Four (4) academic heads from each university were selected through random sampling technique. Total sample of the study comprise of thirty two(32) participants.

## **Instrumentation**

HEC ordinance (2002) document was used for document analysis and an interview protocol was used to intrigue the perceptions of administrative and academic heads. The validity of the protocol was ensured by three experts (a language expert, a qualitative research expert, a QEC director) of field. Further five (5) mock interviews were conducted to ensure the Maxwell validity criteria (2002). The changes were incorporated in the interview protocol after try out study.

## **Data Analysis**

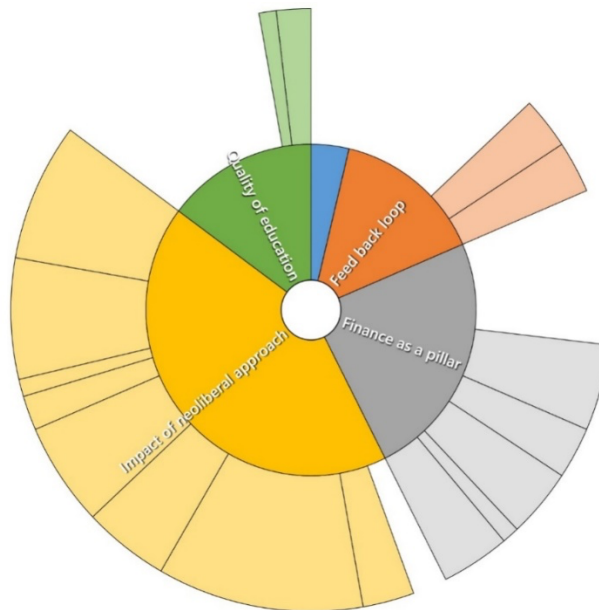
The data is analyzed in two-step. In first step document analysis of HEC ordinance is done by the researcher and in the second step interviews, data is analyzed. The thematic analysis technique is used for the data analysis. Advanced software is used for analysis. Major themes and sub-themes are developed to conclude the impact of the neoliberal approach.

## **Document Analysis**

The establishment of HEC in Pakistan is an effort towards the improvement of research and development. To improve the research and development, Higher Education Commission adopted a neoliberal approach; reflection of it is evident in the Higher Education Commission ordinance 2000. According to Higher Education Commission Ordinance 2002 (2019) under power and functions of commission in chapter two. It advise institutions in raising funds from sources other than the government. On another point it is stated that HEC should support the development of linkages between Institutions and industry as well as national and international organizations that fund research and development with a view to enhancing research. It is advised to the Federal Government and the Provincial Governments on proposals for granting a charter to award degrees in both public and private sector. Establishment of Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORIC) by HEC is another effort to build a liaison between educational institutes and industry. Further the Tenure Tract System (TTS) parallel to the Basic Pay Scale (BPS) is reflecting one of the neoliberal effort made by HEC. The above points clearly align with the characteristics of neoliberal approach presented by literature. The word neoliberal policy for HEC policies is not being frequently used by the researchers of the country however the analysis direct that policy approach of HEC in Pakistan is neoliberal.

## **Interviews data Analysis**

The data collected through interview protocol is analyzed by thematic analysis. The perceptions about the neoliberal approach of research participants are presented by the word cloud, word chart of themes and sub-themes and text query. Seventeen (17) sub-themes were converged in four (4) major themes. The major themes extracted from the data are the *impact of the neoliberal approach*, *finance as a pillar*, *Feedback loop* and *quality of education*.



**Figure 1:** Explore Chart of Major Themes.

The major theme *Impact of neoliberal approach* carries the subthemes Education as a business, Market attitude towards research, the neoliberal approach is a disaster, the neoliberal approach is fine if..., student as a customer, student-teacher ratio, ORICs. Most of the respondents of the study expressed that the neoliberal approach adopted by HEC is to balance the student-teacher ratio; however, the negative impact of the approach cannot be ignored. Some of the participants said that student dealt as a customer makes education only a service. The main objective of education is ignored, and education is treated as a business. One of the participants said. While sharing their perceptions about the neoliberal approach all most all the participants discussed the functions of ORICs. Most of the participants were not satisfied with the performance of ORICs; even the ORIC heads said that their department is not working up to the mark as it is expected to work. Presenting the reason behind the unsatisfactory working of ORICs, most of the participants blamed the attitude of the open market towards research. Many of the participants said that we don't have a research environment in the market; investing money for research purpose is not common practice in our country. Most of the participants said that the impact of the neoliberal approach could be seen after years; currently, its impact is only visible to a few. One of the participants said, "Neoliberal approach by HEC is a disaster, its impact will be visible after twenty (20) years". Another participant said that "Our think tank should be proactive active about this approach, this approach can lead nations to have presidents like Donald Trump and Narendra Modi, biased and racists". One of the participants said that ORICs are only doing clerical work. Some of the participants had no objection to the adaptation of the neoliberal approach by HEC, but they ended up their statements with lots of ifs and buts. As one of the participants said, "HEC has to look after the student-teacher ratio all the time, and higher education is not a compulsory education it is an option, one who can afford it have it, but definitely there should be a good check and balance criteria". The participants accepted the fact that the quality of education will ultimately drop if the check and balance methodology is not followed under the umbrella of the neoliberal approach. Many participants said that introduction of TTS parallel to BPS had divided faculty of higher education into two different sects. Most of the administrators expressed that they are not satisfied with both of the systems. They said that a faculty member with BPS should also feel the responsibility of research work and research contributions to the institute. On the other hand, they say in TTS there are many flaws. One of the participants pinpointed one of the measures of TTS is a Performa which is to be filled by the student; the respondent said, "All

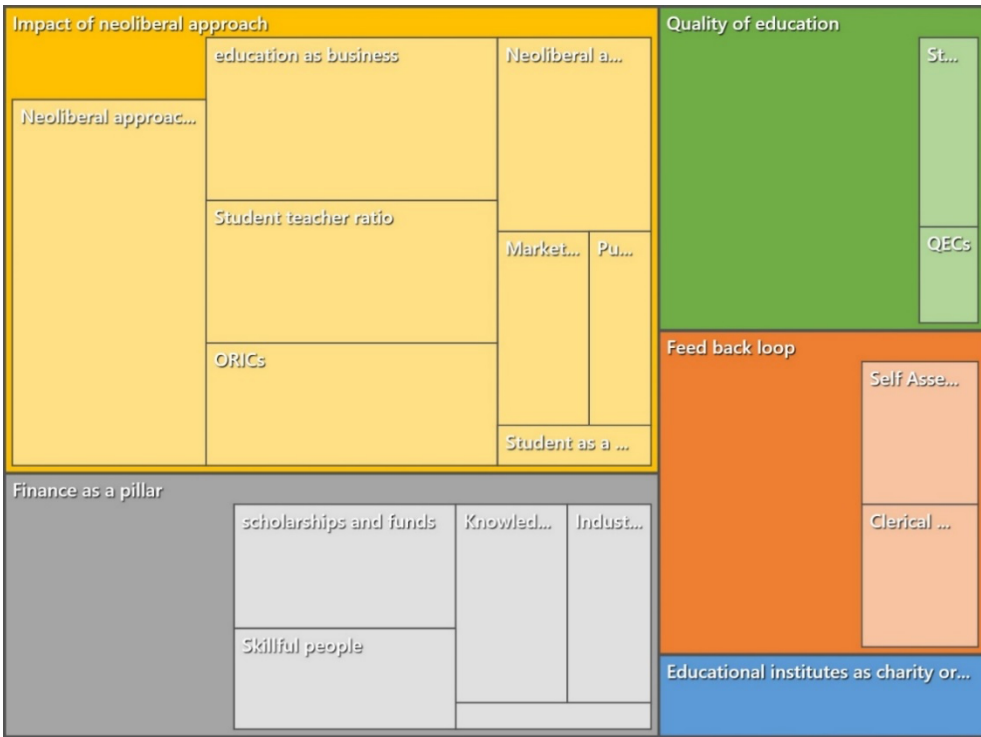
the students are not eligible to evaluate their teacher, sometimes those teachers get better evaluation points from students who don't teach".

The second major theme is *financed as a pillar* has subthemes as scholarships and funds, industry-oriented research, knowledge-based economy, review of policy and documents, last but not the least, skilful people. Almost all of the research participants voiced the fact that the economic and financial needs of higher education institutes cannot be ignored. Finance is the strongest pillar in the building of education. Few of the participants said that to their capable faculty, their universities are unable to provide competitive salaries. Some participants said that to flourish knowledge based economy higher education play the most vital role. Many participants highlighted the fact that in their universities more academic research is going on and less industry-oriented research is done. The lacking factor remains the finance involved in the industry-oriented research. Higher education can contribute to society by producing more and more skilful people. The scholarships and funds are available for the needy students. "The number of scholarships can increase by involving private sector in educational institutes" said one of the participant. Many of the participants pointed the budget cut down of HEC by the government has directly affected the scholarships for both faculty and students. Few of the participants highlighted the fact that educational institutions do not receive any charity by the alumni or the community. They said that in developed countries, educational institutes receive charity, and they are considered charity institutes. This can also be one of the factors for the adaptation of the neoliberal approach by HEC.

*The feedback loop* is identified as the third major theme of this research. The sub-themes were clerical work and self-assessment reports. All the participants expressed their perceptions about the feedback loop and said it is very weak in the current system of HEC. Most of the participants said that a policy is made by HEC; it is then dispensed to particular departments; after that no feedback is taken regarding the implementation of the policy. One of the participant said that "sustainable systems run well by making the feedback loop stronger". Many of them said that some of the neoliberal policies such as Tenure Track System (TTS), is dividing the teachers of higher education into different sects, the check on whether the objectives are being achieved or not is ignored. Some of the participants said that neoliberal approach of HEC is increasing teacher attrition rate. This fact can be conveyed to the HEC by the feedback loop. Most QEC directors expressed confidently that to strengthen the feedback loop, self-assessment reports are collected by the QECs and submitted to HEC and PHECs.

The fourth major theme identified is *quality of education*. QECs and student unions are discovered as the subthemes of this major theme. Quality Enhancement Cells are being talked about by most of the respondents while expressing their views about quality of education. Most of the respondents conveyed that neoliberal approach is ultimately going to effect the quality of education sooner or later. "Establishment of quality enhancement cells is an effort by HEC to keep a quality check in higher education institutes" said one of the participant. Most of the participants said that QECs are trying their best but it is more of paper work than any check and balance process. Many of the respondents said self-assessment reports (SARs) are piles and piles of papers which are collected by QECs and later by HECs. These piles of papers are impossible to check, and the response to these reports by HEC is rare. Economization of curricula is presented by some participants of the study. They said that in higher education, institutes are merging or simply shutting up the departments which are not aligned to the market approach, for example, philosophy, regional languages, history etc. Only those subjects are taught which are in market demand. This is creating an impact on intellectual thinking, and ultimately, quality is dropping. Few of the participants expressed their views about the role of student unions relating to quality. They expressed that student unions played their part in enhancing and encouraging youth; moreover, they provided an unofficial check on the quality of education. The problems and issues related to the fee structures, presence of a teacher, certain discipline problems, co-curricular activities and funds for students were looked into by these unions. "The neoliberal approach is enhanced by weak or almost nonfunctioning of student unions", said one of the participant.

The word chart shows the themes and sub-themes. The space taken by the major themes presents the amount of data from which each major theme is extracted.



**Figure 2:** Word Chart of Major Themes and Subthemes.



**Figure 3:** Word Cloud of the Study

Word cloud present's frequency of the words used in the responses. The size of the word represents the frequency of the words. The word tree is showing the themes and sub-themes extracted from the data.



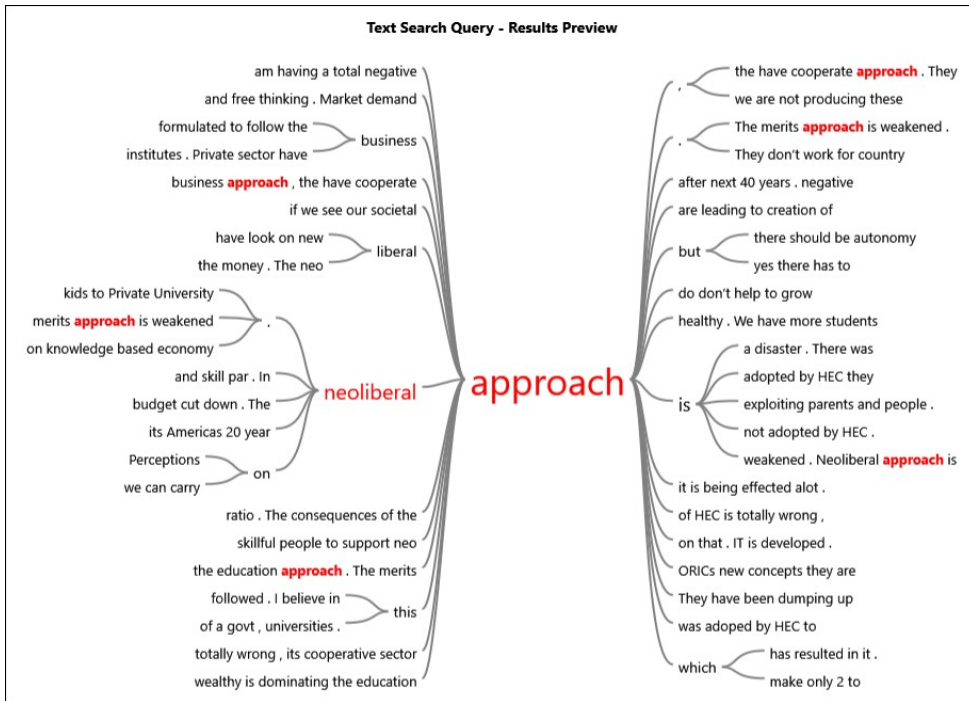


Figure 4: Word Tree of Text Query (Neoliberal Approach)

The word text query represents the data transcription words linkages. This truly depicts the base of data analysis by the researcher. The way in which the construct of neoliberal approach is used and the way respondents presented it in words is shown by tree word text query.

## Findings

The findings of the research are

1. Student dealt as a customer makes education only service and the main objective of education is ignored when education is treated as a business.
2. To hire capable faculty, universities are unable to provide competitive salaries.
3. The neoliberal policies have created an environment of competition resulting in the stratification of academic professionals in accordance to pay structure and certain academic areas of study in reference to market demand.
4. The negative impact of the neoliberal approach in the country will be more visible after few years.
5. The economic and financial needs of higher education institutes cannot be ignored. Finance is the strongest pillar in the building of education.
6. HEC has to look after the student-teacher ratio all the time, and higher education is not a compulsory education; it is an option, one who can afford it have it, but definitely, there should be a good check and balance criteria.

## Discussion

The discussion presents the overlapping and contrasting views of the neoliberal approach in the literature and the results of the current research. The elucidation of students as consumers and faculty as the service provider is shrinking the public dimension of education practices in colleges and universities. This new panache is giving rise to the neoliberal regime, leading to the new structure of the higher education system (Cannella& Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). The research results also point out that

student dealt as a customer makes education only a service. The main objective of education is ignored, and education is treated as a business. Apart from the fact that research in literature and current research is from different part of the world, the results agree with each other. Higher education will be treated like other commodities in which knowledge will be generated in relation to the market (Kabir, 2010). Another outcome of the result shows that said that to heir capable faculty universities are unable to provide competitive salaries. The impact created through neoliberal policies cannot be ignored. The authorities cannot overlook the fact that in the educational pyramid, public universities rest on the top (Tarar, 2015), agreeing with the fact in literature most of the participants said that the impact of the neoliberal approach could be seen after years currently its impact is only visible to few. One of the participants said, “Neoliberal approach by HEC is a disaster, its negative impact will be visible after twenty (20) years”. The neoliberal policies have created an environment of competition resulting in the stratification of academic professionals in accordance to pay structure and certain academic areas of study in reference to market demand. Further, the academic professionals are treated as middle level managers, which are destroying the regard of a teacher (Giroux & McLaren, 2018). The current research identifies administrators are not satisfied with both of the systems. They said that a faculty member with BPS should also feel the responsibility of research work and research contributions to the institute. On the other hand, they say in TTS there are many flaws. One of the participants pinpointed a measure of TTS, a Performa which is to be filled by the student for the evaluation of a teacher respondent said, “All the students are not eligible to evaluate their teacher, sometimes those teachers get better evaluation points from students who don’t teach”.

A knowledge-based economy does not stand on outdated resources like only enhancing human capital and focused on labor availability but on more emphasis on education and especially productive and practical based education (Shumway, 2017). The results of this research voice the fact that the economic and financial needs of higher education institutes cannot be ignored. Finance is the strongest pillar in the building of education. Neoliberalism direct towards the minimum involvement of the state in the governing matters and to make more room for the experimenting market processes (Foucault, 1991). As one of the results concluded that HEC has to look after the student-teacher ratio all the time and higher education is not a compulsory education; it is an option, one who can afford it, have it but definitely, there should be a good check and balance criteria.

## Conclusion

The neoliberal approach is adapted by HEC considering its need of the hour. The development of research in higher education is directly related to the economic conditions of its institutes. The problems like student-teacher ratio, industry-based research, teacher resilience, and to match the international approach are some of the reasons brought about through this research in explanation of neoliberal adaptations. Further, the research concludes that the effects of the neoliberal approach will show its impact after years. The financial conditions of the country have led the think tank of the country to adapt neoliberal approach; however, the current research provides facts that academic leadership is well aware of the upcoming problems related to this approach

According to the findings of this research, the quality of higher education is dropping as education is treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold. An increase in the number of private universities is overtaking the merit approach. The public sector is not strengthening the way it should have been strengthening. QECs, ORICs, self-assessment reports and TTS are identified as some of the efforts by HEC to keep the quality and neoliberal approach hand in hand. Many of them suggest strengthening the public institutions of higher education. The concerned political authorities can play their part actively to minimize the negative effects of the neoliberal approach. Summarized by the researcher, it is definite that the provision of social justice can create equilibrium in the higher education environment.

## Recommendations

The recommendations derived from the findings in aligns with the object of the research are as follows

1. Public sector universities can be provided more stability by improving the check and balance

- processes by making the feedback loop strong.
2. Provision of charity to higher education can provide financial support to higher education institutes.
  3. Ethical leadership trainings can be conducted to emphasize the importance of higher education philosophy of life, not as a commodity of life, to blend social justice with market ideologies.

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