Perceived Procedural Fairness in Lecturer Recruitment and Academic Career Commitment among Early-Career Researchers in Pakistan: The Role of Institutional Trust

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ABSTRACT: The study aimed to examine the mediating role of institutional trust in the relationship between perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment among early-career researchers in Pakistan, particularly in the context of lecturer recruitment. A cross-sectional correlational design and purposive sampling technique were employed to collect data from research assistants and research associates working in public and private sectors, as well as independent researchers. Participants were required to be at least 25 years old, hold a minimum qualification of MS or MPhil, and have an interest in pursuing an academic career as a lecturer in a public or private university in Pakistan. Additionally, they must have applied for lecturer positions at least three times during the preceding year without receiving an interview invitation. Data were collected from Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, and Narowal. Of the 190 individuals approached, 142 met the inclusion criteria and completed the questionnaires, yielding a participation rate of 74.74%. Standardized questionnaires were used to assess the study variables. Correlational analysis revealed significant positive associations among the study variables. However, mediation analysis indicated that institutional trust did not significantly mediate the relationship between perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment. The findings highlight the importance of transparent and merit-based recruitment procedures in strengthening early-career researchers' commitment to academic careers in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS: Perceived Procedural Fairness, Intuitional Trust, Academic Career Commitment

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Introduction

Procedural fairness can be defined as the individuals' views regarding the decisions being established through transparent, fair, consistent, and appropriate procedures (Blader & Tyler, 2003; Burke & Leben, 2024). In academia,

procedural fairness can be defined as the recruitment, research funding, authorship allocation, promotion, performance appraisal, workload breakdown among the employees or collaborators, and access to professional development and research opportunities (Ammari & Howe-Walsh, 2026; Burdziej & Główczewski, 2025). Researchers who view these mechanisms as fair and transparent may feel valued, respected, and supported by their institutions. Whereas perceptions of favoritism, nepotism, limited transparency, and unequal opportunities may shackle researchers' confidence in institutional decision-making (Blader & Tyler, 2003; Burdziej & Główczewski, 2025).

Institutional trust can be defined as the confidence individuals have in an institution's integrity, reliability, competency, and commitment to treating its members fairly (Chan, 2025; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). In academia, institutional trust develops when researchers believe that university policies are transparent for every researcher, consistent and administrative decisions are fair, and institutional authorities act reasonably (Henderson et al., 2024; Pleschová et al., 2025). This may make the researchers feel motivated and encouraged to cooperate with colleagues and pursue professional objectives within their organizations (Pleschová et al., 2025). However, when the institutional policies are viewed as inconsistent, unreliable, and unfair, the researchers may become less interested in investing in their institutions or developing long-term professional relationships among them (Aggarwal et al., 2026; Valgarðsson et al., 2025).

Academic career commitment can be defined as the individual's affiliation with an academic or research career and willingness to continue working in that field (Kidd & Green, 2006; Ravi et al., 2026). Early-career researchers are important because their initial encounters may structure their professional development, research productivity, and decisions to stay in academia for a period of time (Shanley et al., 2022). In particular, transparent lecturer recruitment procedures may encourage qualified applicants to continue pursuing academic careers by providing confidence that their research achievements and professional qualifications will be evaluated fairly. For researchers who aspire to become university lecturers, repeated unsuccessful recruitment experiences and limited access to academic employment may create uncertainty regarding their long-term career prospects. Their commitment is dependent on a number of factors like personal motivation, recognition, feeling valued, and institutional support (Mohammed et al., 2025; Ravi et al., 2026).

Perceived procedural fairness may foster academic career commitment by promoting the idea that promotion, recruitment, funding decisions, and research assistant assignments are consistent and fair (Ambrose & Cropanzano, 2003; Colquitt et al., 2001; Pinho & Colston, 2025). When researchers perceive that their competence and efforts are valued, they may feel more enthusiastic about their future and remain firmly committed to academic work (Kidd & Green, 2006; Meyer et al., 2002). However, inconsistent policies, favoritism, and inconsistent decisions may depreciate their motivation (Ahmed et al., 2023; Pinho & Colston, 2025).

Institutional trust may also indicate the association between procedural fairness and academic career commitment (Jiang et al., 2017; Mukherjee & Bhattacharya, 2013). Fair procedures may show that institutions respect their researchers and make reasonable decisions (Guh et al., 2013; Mubashar et al., 2022). This can enhance trust in institutional policies and leadership (Arif et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2024). Researchers who believe in their institution's fairness may be more likely to collaborate, acknowledge decisions, and pursue long-term academic careers (Guh et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2017). Therefore, institutional trust may play a psychological bridge between the relationship of perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment (Mukherjee & Bhattacharya, 2013; Mubashar et al., 2022).

Rationale of the Study

In Pakistan, early-career and independent researchers may face considerable challenges in securing lecturer positions despite having relevant research experience and established publication records. Limited academic vacancies, perceived nepotism, favoritism, unfair recruitment practices, and unclear selection criteria may create uncertainty regarding academic employment opportunities and undermine researchers' confidence in institutional decision-making. These experiences may also influence their willingness to continue pursuing academic careers, particularly when their research achievements and professional qualifications do not appear to translate into equal employment opportunities. Independent researchers may encounter additional obstacles due to limited institutional affiliation, professional networking opportunities, and access to academic resources. Despite the potential importance of recruitment fairness in shaping researchers' professional confidence and career decisions, the relationship between perceived procedural fairness, institutional trust, and academic career commitment remains insufficiently examined in the Pakistani context. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the associations among perceived procedural fairness, institutional trust, and academic career commitment among early-career researchers in Pakistan. It also investigates whether institutional trust mediates the relationship between perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment.

Hypotheses

H1: Perceived procedural fairness will be positively associated with institutional trust among early-career researchers in Pakistan.

H2: Perceived procedural fairness will be positively associated with academic career commitment.

H3: Institutional trust will be positively associated with academic career commitment.

H4: Institutional trust will mediate the relationship between perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the associations among perceived procedural fairness, institutional trust, and academic career commitment. This design enabled the examination of relationships among the study variables at a particular point in time. Furthermore, purposive sampling was employed to recruit assistant researchers working in public and private sectors and independent researchers residing in Lahore, Faisalabad, Karachi, and Narowal. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 25 years old, hold a minimum qualification of MS or MPhil, express an interest in pursuing an academic career as a lecturer in a public or private university in Pakistan, and have applied for lecturer positions at least three times during the preceding year without receiving an interview invitation. Of the 190 individuals approached, 142 met the inclusion criteria and completed the questionnaires, yielding a 74.74% participation rate.

Participants and Sampling

The demographic characteristics of the 142 participants indicated that their mean age was 29.96 years (SD = 4.39). Most participants were men (63.4%, n = 90), while women accounted for 36.6% (n = 52). Regarding academic qualifications, 45.8% (n = 65) were PhD scholars, 31.7% (n = 45) were PhD graduates, and 22.5% (n = 32) held an MS/MPhil qualification. In terms of institutional affiliation, 45.8% (n = 65) worked as assistant researchers in the private sector, 31.7% (n = 45) worked as assistant researchers in the public sector, and 22.5% (n = 32) were

independent researchers without current organizational employment. Regarding residential city, 47.9% (n = 68) lived in Karachi, 27.5% (n = 39) in Lahore, 17.6% (n = 25) in Faisalabad, and 7.0% (n = 10) in Narowal.

Measures

Perceived procedural fairness was assessed using the Procedural Justice Subscale of the Organizational Justice Measure (Colquitt, 2001), which consists of 7 items. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale was considered appropriate because its items assess the fairness, consistency, and transparency of institutional decision-making procedures, which are relevant to lecturer recruitment and selection processes. The study reported high internal consistency (α = .90).

Institutional trustworthiness was evaluated using the Planning and Action subscale of the Multidimensional Institutional Trustworthiness Scale (MITS), developed by Kuhlemeier et al. (2026). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The study reported high internal consistency of 0.87.

Academic career commitment was measured using the Career Commitment Measure developed by Carson and Bedeian (1994), containing 12 items responses followed the original scale's Likert format, 1 to 5. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was .71, which is satisfactory.

Ethical Considerations

After finalizing the topic, the instruments' authors were approached via email for permission purposes. Upon taking permission, the consent form and demographic questionnaires were attached to the study instruments, and as per the accessibility of the authors, the data were collected from Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, and Narowal. Participants were initially given the consent form, which clearly demonstrated participation, right of withdrawal, and confidentiality of the participants' responses voluntarily. After a written signature on the consent form, the participants were provided with the demographic questionnaires and study instruments. Once the data were collected, they were entered into IBM SPSS version 27 for analysis purposes.

Results

Table 1

Correlational Analysis (N = 142)

Variables	1	2	3
1.Perceived Procedural Fairness	-	.98***	.74***
2.Institutional Trust		-	.73***
3.Academic Career Commitment			-

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 1 shows significant positive correlations between perceived procedural fairness and institutional trust (r = .98, p < .001), perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment (r = .74, p < .001), and institutional trust and academic career commitment (r = .73, p < .001).

Table 2

Predicting Academic Career Commitment from Perceived Procedural Fairness Through Institutional Trust (N = 142)

		Consequences						
		Institutional Trust (M)				Academic Career Commitment (Y)		
Antecedents		**B**	***SE***	***P***		**B**	***SE***	***P***
Perceived Procedural Fairness (X)	a	.84***	.01	<.001	c'	.52	.32	.10
Institutional Trust (M)	-				b	.20	.37	.58
Constant	*I*	.04	.23	.86	*I*	13.82***	1.04	<.001
		R^2= .97, *F* = 5050.96				R^2= .55, *F* = 86.18		
		***p < .001				***p <.001		

Note. ***p<.001,

Table 2 shows that perceived procedural fairness significantly and positively predicted institutional trust (B = .84, SE = .01, p < .001). The model explained 97% of the variance in institutional trust (R^2 = .97, F = 5050.96, p < .001). When institutional trust was included as a mediator, perceived procedural fairness did not significantly predict academic career commitment (B = .52, SE = .32, p = .10). Similarly, institutional trust did not significantly predict academic career commitment (B = .20, SE = .37, p = .58). The second model explained 55% of the variance in academic career commitment (R^2 = .55, F = 86.18, p < .001).

Table 3

Indirect Effect

Pathways	B	B	BootSE	95% CI (BootLLCI – BootULCI)
IT	.17	.18	.39	-.55 - .97

Note. N = 142, IT = Institutional Trust

The indirect effect analysis indicates that perceived procedural fairness had no statistically significant indirect effect on academic career commitment through institutional trust (B = .17, β = .18, BootSE = .39, 95% CI [–.55, .97]). Because the 95% bootstrap confidence interval includes zero, the indirect effect was not statistically significant.

Discussion

The present study investigated the mediating role of institutional trust in the association between perceived procedural fairness and academic career commitment among early-career researchers in Pakistan. The findings demonstrated a significant positive association among variables. These results revealed that researchers who view recruitment and institutional decision-making procedures as fair may report higher trust in institutions and stronger commitment to academic careers. The study results align with the organizational justice theory, which states that fair procedures influence individuals' assessment of authorities and their intention to sustain relationships with organizations (Colquitt et al., 2001). Likewise, Tyler and Blader (2003) highlighted that fair treatment can foster individuals' identification with organizations and groups.

Mediation analysis reported that institutional trust did not significantly predict academic career commitment when perceived procedural fairness was entered in the model. The indirect effect was also nonsignificant, indicating that institutional trust did not mediate the association between procedural fairness and academic career commitment. The reason behind this could be that early-career researchers' commitment may rely on practical career opportunities, professional recognition, valuation, and transparent recruitment criteria instead of institutional trust solely. Research on organizational commitment also emphasizes the importance of workplace experiences and perceived

organizational support in enhancing and evaluating the employees' attachment to their work surroundings (Meyer et al., 2002).

Conclusion

The study found significant positive associations among perceived procedural fairness, institutional trust, and academic career commitment. However, institutional trust did not significantly mediate the relationship between procedural fairness and academic career commitment. The findings highlight the importance of transparent, merit-based lecturer recruitment, clear selection criteria, and equal employment opportunities in Pakistani universities. Despite its contributions, the study was limited by its cross-sectional design, purposive sampling, relatively small sample, and restricted geographical coverage. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and qualitative interviews. Additional factors, including perceived organizational support, professional recognition, nepotism, and job insecurity, should also be investigated to better understand academic career commitment.

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