



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract. This article reflects on the methodological challenges and decisions involved in conducting qualitative research on university leadership and organizational change in Kazakhstan. Drawing on a multiple-case study of three regional public universities, the paper examines how a qualitative research design was developed in a higher education context shaped by state-led reform, institutional autonomy, internationalization, and expectations of organizational transformation. The study used semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis to explore how university rectors, vice rectors, members of the Board of Directors, deans, and national policy actors interpreted institutional change. The article identifies several methodological issues that became central to the study: defining case boundaries in a policy-dense environment, gaining access to senior leaders and policy actors, balancing rectoral accounts with the perspectives of other university constituents, integrating interview and documentary data, and reflecting on the researcher's insider positionality. The article argues that qualitative research on university leadership in Kazakhstan requires methodological flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and systematic triangulation.

Keywords: qualitative research, multiple-case study, university leadership, organizational change, sensemaking, Kazakhstan, higher education.

Introduction

Qualitative research on university leadership is methodologically complex because leadership in higher education is not located only in formal titles, strategic plans, or rectoral decisions. It is shaped by institutional history, academic culture, governance arrangements, policy pressures, and the meanings that different actors attach to change. This complexity becomes especially visible when universities are expected to transform. During reform, leaders must not only make decisions but also explain why change is necessary, translate external policy priorities into institutional strategies, and create shared meanings among people who may experience the same reform differently.

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This article presents a methodological account of conducting qualitative research on university leadership and organizational change in Kazakhstan. It draws on a multiple-case study of three regional public universities and focuses on the decisions that shaped the research design. Rather than presenting the full empirical findings, the article reflects on how the study was constructed, why particular qualitative methods were chosen, what challenges emerged, and how those challenges were addressed.

Kazakhstan provides an important context for such reflection. Since independence in 1991, its higher education system has undergone restructuring, marketization, Bologna Process alignment, governance reform, and more recent efforts to expand academic and managerial autonomy. Research has shown that autonomy has become an important policy direction, although it has developed within a system still shaped by state steering and inherited governance traditions (Hartley et al., 2016). The 2018 law on expanding academic and managerial independence gave universities more decision-making space in academic programming, governance, and institutional development (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2018). The Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023–2029 further emphasizes transformation, internationalization, competitiveness, and adaptation of international experience as national priorities (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

These reforms have changed expectations toward university leaders. Rectors and senior leadership teams are expected to lead institutional development, respond to market and demographic pressures, internationalize academic programs, develop partnerships, and improve competitiveness. At the same time, universities continue to operate in a policy environment where national priorities strongly shape institutional agendas. A qualitative study of university leadership in Kazakhstan therefore needs to connect national policy, institutional culture, leadership interpretation, and stakeholder sensemaking.

The original study asked: How do leaders of regional public universities undertake and manage organizational changes on their campuses in Kazakhstan? Three sub-questions guided the inquiry: how national higher education policies influence organizational change; what change strategies public university leaders undertake; and how campus constituents make sense of those strategies. In this article, these substantive questions are reframed as a methodological question: How can a qualitative researcher design a credible and context-sensitive multiple-case study of university leadership in a reforming higher education system?

The article argues that such research requires five methodological commitments: defining cases as bounded institutions while recognizing the broader policy environment; including multiple participant groups so leadership is not reduced to a rectoral narrative; analyzing interviews as meaning-making accounts; integrating documents with interview and focus group data; and making researcher positionality visible as part of research quality.

Literature review

Qualitative Case Study as a Methodological Approach

Case study methodology is particularly appropriate when researchers seek to understand a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Yin (2018) argues that case study research is useful when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. This point is central to the study of university leadership. Leadership in higher education cannot be separated from institutional culture, governance structures, policy demands, academic traditions, stakeholder expectations, and historical conditions. For this reason, a case study approach allows the researcher to study leadership as situated practice rather than as an abstract set of individual traits.

The study that informs this article used a multiple-case study design. A multiple-case design was appropriate because the research focused on three regional public universities that shared

similar broad conditions but had their own institutional histories and leadership arrangements. Each university was treated as a bounded case. At the same time, the three cases were located within a shared national policy context. This design made it possible to examine both common reform pressures and case-specific interpretations of change.

The value of a multiple-case study lies not in statistical generalization, but in analytical depth and comparison. When cases are selected carefully, they can help the researcher examine whether similar patterns appear across different institutional settings (Yin, 2018). In this study, the three universities were selected because they were regional public universities responding to national expectations connected to autonomy, internationalization, and institutional transformation.

Qualitative research design also requires alignment between research questions, conceptual framework, methods, validity strategies, and researcher positionality. Maxwell (2013) describes qualitative design as interactive rather than linear. This means that methodological decisions are connected to one another. The choice of research questions influences the selection of participants; the conceptual framework shapes the coding process; validity strategies are connected to the type of claims the researcher wants to make; and positionality influences access, interpretation, and the relationship between researcher and participants.

The constructivist orientation of the study also shaped its methodology. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that qualitative research is concerned with how people interpret their experiences and construct meaning in particular contexts. In this study, participants were not treated simply as informants who reported objective facts about change. They were treated as actors who made sense of reform from their own institutional positions. A rector, a vice rector, a dean, a Board member, and a ministry official may all speak about the same reform, but each may understand it differently. These differences are not methodological problems to be eliminated. They are part of the phenomenon under study.

Organizational Change in Higher Education

Organizational change in higher education is rarely simple or linear. Universities are complex institutions with formal hierarchies, collegial traditions, professional autonomy, disciplinary cultures, symbolic meanings, and political interests. Change in such settings involves not only new policies or structures, but also changes in meanings, relationships, routines, and expectations. This is one reason why qualitative research is valuable for studying higher education change: it can show how reforms are interpreted, negotiated, resisted, or adapted by people inside institutions.

Kezar's (2018) work on organizational change in higher education provided an important conceptual foundation for the study. Her change macro framework emphasizes several dimensions of change, including the type of change, the context for change, leadership and agency, and the approach to change. This framework helped avoid treating change as a single event. Instead, change was examined as a process shaped by external forces, institutional culture, leadership strategies, and stakeholder interpretation.

The type of change matters because not all reforms have the same depth or scope. Some changes are limited adjustments, while others are more pervasive and may alter institutional culture or organizational identity. In higher education, the language of transformation is often used in policy and strategy documents. However, the actual depth of change cannot be assumed from official language alone. A university may describe a new international program or governance reform as transformational, but qualitative data may show that the change is uneven, partial, or interpreted differently across organizational levels.

Eckel and Kezar's (2003) work on institutional transformation is useful here because it draws attention to the depth and pervasiveness of change. Transformational change affects not only structures or procedures, but also institutional assumptions, values, and patterns of behavior. This distinction is methodologically important. A researcher studying organizational change

must ask not only whether a reform was introduced, but how it affected institutional life, how it was interpreted, and whether it changed established ways of working.

Context is also central. Kezar (2018) argues that change in higher education must be understood in relation to social, political, economic, and institutional conditions. In Kazakhstan, these conditions include post-Soviet governance legacies, state-led reform, regional inequalities, demographic pressures, market competition, internationalization, and evolving expectations of institutional autonomy. Regional public universities are particularly important because they operate outside the country's major metropolitan centers and may face different resource conditions and reputational pressures than national or autonomous universities.

Shared leadership literature also challenges the idea that change is produced by one person. Kezar and Holcombe (2017) argue that leadership in higher education is often distributed and that shared leadership can support institutional learning and innovation. This perspective is important for research design. If leadership is distributed, then the study of leadership must include multiple actors. Rectors matter, but so do vice-rectors, Board members, deans, faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders. A qualitative methodology must therefore capture the relationships among these actors rather than focusing only on formal authority.

Sensemaking, Sensegiving, and Rectoral Leadership

Sensemaking was another important theoretical lens for the study. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as the process through which people interpret ambiguous situations and construct plausible understandings of what is happening. Sensemaking is especially relevant during organizational change because change often creates uncertainty. People may ask why change is necessary, what it means for their work, who is driving it, whether it is legitimate, and how it connects to institutional values.

Sensegiving is closely connected to sensemaking. It refers to attempts by leaders or other actors to influence how people understand events or organizational priorities. Kezar's (2013) work on sensemaking and sensegiving in transformational change is useful because it shows that change is not only implemented through formal plans but also through meaning-making processes. Leaders engage in sensegiving when they explain why change is necessary, frame a reform as an opportunity, connect it to institutional mission, or persuade stakeholders to support it.

This perspective shaped the study's approach to interviews. Interviews were not treated simply as containers of factual information. They were understood as moments in which participants constructed accounts of change. When a rector explained a reform, the account could be read as both reflection and sensegiving. When deans discussed the same reform in a focus group, their conversation showed collective sensemaking. When policy actors described national reform priorities, they revealed how the state framed the need for institutional change.

Rectoral leadership is central to organizational change in higher education. Rectors are expected to provide direction, represent the institution, coordinate strategy, respond to external demands, and create conditions for institutional development. Yet rectors work in organizations where authority is fragmented and where academic values, professional autonomy, and institutional culture matter deeply. Birnbaum's (1992) distinction between instrumental and interpretive leadership is useful for understanding this complexity. Instrumental leadership refers to planning, decision-making, coordination, and management. Interpretive leadership refers to shaping meaning and connecting institutional actions to shared values.

This distinction was especially relevant in Kazakhstan. University rectors were not only institutional managers. They were also interpreters of national reform. They had to make sense of autonomy, internationalization, corporate governance, and transformation in ways that could be translated into local institutional strategies. Institutional culture further shaped how leadership was received. Kezar and Eckel (2002) argue that change strategies are more likely to be effective when they are aligned with institutional culture. For methodology, this means that leadership

research must ask not only what leaders intended, but how their intentions were interpreted by those who received, translated, or implemented leadership decisions.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative multiple-case study of university leadership and organizational change in three regional public universities in Kazakhstan. The methodology section describes the design of that original study, because the purpose of this article is to reflect on the methodological decisions and challenges that emerged from it.

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative multiple-case study of university leadership and organizational change in Kazakhstan. The original research focused on three regional public universities and examined how their leaders undertook and managed organizational changes in the context of national higher education reforms. In this article, I use that study to reflect on the methodological decisions that shaped the inquiry.

A qualitative design was appropriate because the study focused on meanings, interpretations, experiences, and institutional processes rather than predetermined measures of leadership effectiveness. The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which views organizational change as interpreted differently by actors depending on their institutional positions and experiences. A university rector may understand reform as strategic transformation, while a dean may experience the same process as an implementation challenge, and a ministry official may frame it as national modernization.

Case study methodology was selected because university leadership in Kazakhstan could not be separated from its real-life context. As Yin (2018) argues, case study research is useful when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. Leadership decisions in regional public universities were shaped by institutional histories, national reforms, policy expectations, internationalization pressures, governance arrangements, and regional conditions. The design was exploratory, allowing attention to variation, contradiction, and complexity across the three cases.

Case Selection and Sampling

The study used purposeful and criterion case sampling to select information-rich cases that could illuminate the relationship between leadership, policy, and organizational change (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 1990). Three criteria guided the selection of universities. First, each institution had to be a public university located in a region of Kazakhstan rather than in Astana or Almaty. Second, each had to be involved in internationalization initiatives, including international dual-degree or joint-degree programs. Third, each institution had to frame internationalization or curriculum reform as part of broader organizational change in its strategic documents or institutional priorities.

For ethical reasons, the three universities were anonymized as Iris University, Tulip University, and Clover University. This was necessary because the study involved senior leaders and sensitive institutional information. In a relatively small higher education system, universities and individuals may be identifiable even when names are removed.

Participant sampling was also purposeful. Although university rectors were central participants, the study was not designed only around rectoral narratives. The sample included national policy actors, university rectors, vice rectors, Board members, directors, and deans. In total, the study included 32 participants: six representatives of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education or related national policy structures, ten participants from Iris University, nine from Tulip University, and seven from Clover University. The study included 18 semi-structured interviews and three focus group interviews with deans.

Data Collection

The study used three qualitative methods: semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection. Interviews with university rectors explored how they understood their leadership roles, interpreted national reforms, initiated change, and communicated change to others. These interviews were informed by Seidman's (2006) approach to in-depth interviewing, especially its attention to life history, experience, and meaning.

Interviews with vice rectors, Board members, directors, and policy actors broadened the study by showing how strategic decisions were translated into academic, administrative, governance, and policy contexts. Focus group interviews with deans helped reveal how leadership strategies were understood beyond the rector's office. Focus groups were appropriate because they allowed participants to interact with one another and construct meaning collectively (Morgan, 1996).

Document analysis was the third source of data. Documents were treated as part of the research setting rather than as background material. In a policy-dense system, documents do not merely record decisions; they also shape the language and legitimacy of change. Following Bowen's (2009) view of document analysis as contextual and corroborative evidence, the study examined external documents, including national laws, ministerial decrees, state programs, and policy concepts, as well as internal university strategies, institutional policies, and materials related to internationalization and organizational change.

Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

The study used thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across interviews, focus groups, and documents (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was theoretically informed by concepts of organizational change, sensemaking, sensegiving, rectoral leadership, and institutional culture, while remaining open to themes emerging from the data. Structural coding was used to organize data around the research questions and conceptual categories, and pattern coding helped identify broader themes across the cases (Saldaña, 2013). A key analytical decision was to analyze interviews, focus groups, and documents within the same broad thematic framework rather than treating them as separate data sets.

Trustworthiness was addressed through triangulation, respondent validation, negative case analysis, theoretical triangulation, and reflexivity. Data triangulation was achieved by including different participant groups, while method triangulation was achieved through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Johnson's (1997) work on qualitative validity was useful in considering descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, internal, and external dimensions of validity.

Ethical considerations were important because the study involved senior leaders and identifiable institutions. Universities were anonymized, and participants were identified by role rather than by name. Researcher positionality was also central. My professional experience in Kazakhstan's higher education sector supported access and contextual understanding, but it also required reflexivity to avoid assuming meanings too quickly. Triangulation, negative case analysis, and reflexive practice helped me use insider knowledge as a resource while questioning my own assumptions.

Results

The focus is not on the full substantive findings of the original study, but on the main methodological challenges that emerged and the decisions made in response. Five findings were especially important: defining case boundaries in a policy-dense environment, gaining access to elite participants, balancing rectoral narratives with other stakeholder perspectives, integrating multiple forms of data, and managing insider positionality.

Defining Case Boundaries in a Policy-Dense Environment

The first methodological challenge was defining the boundaries of the cases. In case study research, the case must be clearly bounded (Yin, 2018). However, in this study, the boundary of each university was not simple. The three universities were regional public institutions, but their strategies and leadership decisions were strongly shaped by national higher education policy. Reforms related to autonomy, internationalization, corporate governance, and competitiveness created a shared external environment for all three universities.

The methodological decision was to treat each university as a bounded case while also analyzing the national policy environment as a shared contextual layer. This allowed me to preserve the institution as the main unit of analysis while recognizing the influence of external reform. Without attention to national policy, the study would have treated institutional change as though it emerged only from internal leadership choices. Without attention to the institution, the study would have reduced universities to passive recipients of policy. The layered case boundary allowed both policy and institutional agency to remain visible.

This finding is important for researchers studying higher education systems where the state remains a strong actor. In such contexts, institutional case studies need to include the external policy environment. At the same time, researchers should not reduce universities to passive policy implementers. Universities interpret, translate, and sometimes reshape national priorities in relation to their own histories, capacities, and cultures.

Gaining Access to Elite Participants

The second methodological challenge was gaining access to elite participants. The study required interviews with university rectors, vice-rectors, Board members, and policy actors. These participants had important knowledge about institutional strategy and national reform, but they were also busy and publicly visible. Their participation required trust, clarity, and careful ethical handling.

Access was supported by my familiarity with Kazakhstan's higher education sector. I understood the institutional structures, policy language, and leadership roles. This helped me identify relevant participants and explain the purpose of the study. However, access also created a methodological challenge. Elite participants often speak from positions of responsibility. Their accounts may reflect personal views, but they may also represent institutional or policy narratives.

For this reason, I treated elite interviews as interpretive accounts rather than neutral descriptions of events. When rectors or policy actors spoke about reform, their accounts were analyzed as part of the meaning-making process. They were not dismissed as official narratives, but they were also not accepted as the only version of reality. Their accounts were compared with those of deans, Board members, vice rectors, and documents.

Confidentiality was closely connected to access. In a small higher education system, even anonymized participants may be recognizable by role or institutional history. The use of university pseudonyms helped protect participants, but it was also necessary to make careful decisions about how much contextual detail to include. The challenge was to provide enough information for the reader to understand the cases without making participants identifiable.

Balancing Rectoral Narratives with Stakeholder Perspectives

The third methodological challenge was avoiding an overly rector-centered account of leadership. Since the study focused on university leadership, rectors were central participants. Their accounts were necessary for understanding institutional strategy, reform interpretation, and leadership decision-making. However, a study based only on rectoral interviews would have produced an incomplete picture.

Leadership in higher education is not simply what rectors say or do. It is also how their decisions are interpreted, translated, and enacted by others. Vice rectors, Board members, deans, and policy actors all participate in the leadership process in different ways. Deans were especially

important because they worked at the intersection of senior leadership and academic units. They were responsible for interpreting strategic directions and managing implementation in practice.

The inclusion of focus groups with deans helped balance the study. These focus groups showed how leadership strategies were understood at the academic-unit level. Sometimes deans' accounts supported rectoral narratives. At other times, they complicated them by pointing to communication gaps, implementation challenges, workload, or uncertainty. These differences were not treated as inconsistencies to be eliminated. They were treated as evidence of how organizational change is interpreted across levels.

This finding reinforced the importance of sensemaking as a methodological lens. Rectors often engaged in sensegiving when they explained reforms and described institutional priorities. Deans and other stakeholders engaged in sensemaking as they interpreted these messages and connected them to their own work. Studying both processes made the analysis richer and helped avoid a one-sided rectoral story of transformation.

Integrating Interviews, Focus Groups, and Documents

The fourth methodological challenge was integrating different forms of data. The study generated data from individual interviews, focus groups, external policy documents, and internal institutional documents. Each type of data provided a different view of organizational change. Interviews provided depth and individual interpretation. Focus groups showed collective meaning-making among deans. Policy documents showed how national reforms were framed. Institutional documents showed how universities formally represented their strategies and priorities.

The methodological decision was to use a shared thematic framework across all data sources. This allowed me to trace key themes across policy, institutional strategy, leadership accounts, and stakeholder interpretations. For example, the theme of internationalization appeared across all data sources, but its meaning shifted depending on the source. In national documents, it was connected to competitiveness and modernization. In institutional strategies, it was connected to university development. In rectoral interviews, it was often connected to leadership vision. In focus groups, it was connected to practical implementation.

This integration helped reveal both alignment and tension. Sometimes documents and interviews supported one another. At other times, participant accounts complicated the official narrative. A strategy document might present change as planned and coherent, while participants described uncertainty, negotiation, or uneven implementation. These differences were analytically useful because they showed the gap between formal policy representation and institutional experience.

Managing Insider Positionality

The fifth methodological challenge was managing insider positionality. My professional experience in Kazakhstan's higher education sector shaped the study from the beginning. It influenced the research questions, the choice of cases, the selection of participants, and the interpretation of data. This insider position was valuable because it gave me contextual knowledge and helped me understand the significance of policy language, institutional structures, and leadership roles.

At the same time, insider positionality created risks. Familiarity can make some things seem obvious when they need to be examined. It can lead the researcher to assume shared meanings or overlook alternative interpretations. Participants may also speak differently to a researcher they perceive as familiar with the system. They may leave some things unsaid because they assume the researcher already understands the context.

To address these risks, I used reflexivity throughout the study. I paid attention to how my own professional background shaped my interpretations. I also used triangulation and negative case analysis to test emerging themes. When data complicated my assumptions, I treated those moments as important rather than inconvenient. This helped me avoid turning the study into a confirmation of what I already believed about higher education reform in Kazakhstan.

Together, these methodological findings show that qualitative research on university leadership in Kazakhstan requires an integrated and context-sensitive design. The study could not rely on one method, one participant group, or one level of analysis. The complexity of the topic required multiple cases, multiple perspectives, multiple data sources, and reflexive interpretation.

Discussion

The methodological findings of this study need to be understood in relation to the broader literature on qualitative case study research, organizational change in higher education, sense-making, rectoral leadership, and qualitative validity. The main contribution of this article is not only that it describes the research design of a multiple-case study, but that it shows how methodological decisions were shaped by the nature of the phenomenon itself. University leadership in Kazakhstan could not be studied as an isolated individual practice. It had to be studied as a contextually embedded, interpretive, and relational process.

First, the study confirms the importance of case study methodology for examining leadership in higher education systems where the boundaries between institutional action and external policy context are blurred. Yin (2018) argues that case study research is appropriate when the phenomenon cannot be separated from its real-life context. This principle was central to the design of the study. The leadership practices of rectors and senior administrators in the three regional universities were closely connected to national policy reforms, including the expansion of academic and managerial autonomy, the state's emphasis on internationalization, and the broader policy language of transformation and competitiveness (Hartley et al., 2016; Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2018; Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). For this reason, each university had to be understood as a bounded institutional case located within a broader policy environment.

Second, the study shows that methodological decisions in leadership research should be informed by theories of organizational change in higher education. Kezar's change macro framework emphasizes that change must be examined through several dimensions, including the type of change, context for change, leadership and agency, and approaches to change (Kezar, 2018). This framework helped structure the study because organizational change in the three universities was not treated as a single event or policy outcome. Instead, change was examined as a process shaped by external forces, institutional histories, leadership decisions, and stakeholder interpretations.

The importance of institutional culture was also central. Kezar and Eckel (2002) argue that change strategies in higher education are more likely to be effective when they are culturally responsive and aligned with institutional values. This theoretical point has methodological implications. It means that researchers cannot understand change only by reading strategic plans or interviewing senior leaders. They also need to investigate how change is interpreted within the institution. In this study, the inclusion of deans, Board members, vice-rectors, and institutional documents made it possible to examine whether leadership narratives were shared, modified, or questioned by other university actors.

Third, the study supports the value of sensemaking and sensegiving as analytical lenses for qualitative research on university leadership. Weick's theory of sensemaking emphasizes that people construct meaning in situations of ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick, 1995). This was highly relevant to the Kazakhstan context, where reforms such as autonomy, internationalization, and institutional transformation carried powerful policy meanings but were interpreted differently inside universities. Kezar's (2013) work on sensemaking and sensegiving in transformational change further helped explain the relationship between leadership communication and stakeholder interpretation. Rectors and senior leaders did not merely describe reforms; they tried to give meaning to them. Deans and other participants engaged in their own sensemaking

as they interpreted what these reforms meant for academic programs, workload, curriculum, and implementation.

Fourth, the study contributes to the literature on rectoral leadership by showing why rectoral accounts need to be placed in conversation with other institutional perspectives. Birnbaum's (1992) distinction between instrumental and interpretive leadership is useful here. University rectors exercise instrumental leadership when they coordinate strategy, make decisions, allocate resources, and represent the institution externally. They exercise interpretive leadership when they explain what change means and connect it to institutional values. In the Kazakhstan context, this interpretive role was especially important because rectors had to translate national reform language into institutional priorities.

At the same time, the study supports the argument that leadership in higher education should not be reduced to heroic individual leadership. Kezar and Holcombe's work on shared leadership emphasizes that change in higher education often depends on distributed forms of leadership and collective responsibility (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). The methodological implication is clear: a study of university leadership should include those who interpret and enact leadership decisions, not only those who formally make them. The importance of shared vision in change processes is also supported by Doten-Snitker et al. (2021), who show that inclusive change depends on communication, stakeholder engagement, and recognition of stakeholder autonomy. This is relevant to the present study because organizational change in universities cannot be understood only through formal policy adoption. It also depends on whether different stakeholders develop a shared or at least workable understanding of the change.

Fifth, the study demonstrates the importance of document analysis and triangulation in qualitative higher education research. Bowen argues that document analysis can provide important contextual and corroborative evidence in qualitative inquiry (Bowen, 2009). In this study, documents were not used only to verify interview claims. They were treated as part of the institutional and policy environment. National laws, government concepts, university strategies, and internal policy documents helped construct the language through which change was formally described. This confirms that triangulation should not be understood only as a search for consistency. Sometimes documents, interviews, and focus groups supported one another. At other times, they revealed tensions. These differences were analytically valuable because they showed how official reform language was reinterpreted inside universities.

Finally, the study reinforces the importance of qualitative validity and researcher positionality. Johnson argues that qualitative validity includes descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, internal, and external dimensions (Johnson, 1997). These dimensions were relevant throughout the study. Theoretical validity was strengthened by using several conceptual lenses, including organizational change, sensemaking, rectoral leadership, and institutional culture. Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) work on conceptual frameworks is also relevant because the study's theoretical framework was not separate from the methodology. It guided the research questions, data collection, and analysis. Ravitch and Carl (2021) further argue that qualitative researchers must examine how their identities, experiences, and relationships shape the research process. In this study, insider positionality was both a strength and a challenge. Knowledge of Kazakhstan's higher education system supported access and contextual understanding, but it also required careful attention to bias, assumptions, and alternative explanations.

Overall, the discussion shows that the methodological challenges of this study were not accidental or merely practical. They emerged from the nature of the research problem. University leadership in Kazakhstan is shaped by national policy, institutional autonomy reforms, organizational culture, and stakeholder interpretation. Therefore, a credible qualitative study of this topic required a design that connected policy context, institutional cases, leadership narratives, stakeholder sensemaking, documents, and researcher positionality.

Conclusion

This article has examined the methodological decisions involved in conducting a qualitative multiple-case study of university leadership and organizational change in Kazakhstan. Drawing on three regional public universities, it has shown that research on leadership in a reforming higher education system requires more than the application of standard qualitative procedures. It requires close attention to policy context, institutional culture, participant roles, documentary evidence, and the researcher's own positionality.

The study demonstrates that regional public universities in Kazakhstan should be examined as bounded institutional cases, but not as isolated organizations. Their leadership practices are shaped by national reforms related to autonomy, internationalization, modernization, and competitiveness. For this reason, the research design had to connect institutional cases with the broader policy environment. The study also shows the importance of including multiple voices. Rectors are central to institutional change, but vice-rectors, Board members, deans, directors, and policy actors also shape how change is interpreted and enacted.

The article's main contribution is methodological. It shows how multiple-case study design can be adapted to examine university leadership as a process of interpretation, communication, and negotiation. By combining interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the study was able to trace how reform was framed at the national level, translated by university leaders, and interpreted within academic units.

Future research could extend this approach to other types of universities in Kazakhstan and to comparative studies across Central Asia or other post-socialist higher education systems. Such work would further clarify how qualitative methodology can capture the relationship between leadership, policy, and institutional change in reform-oriented contexts.

Contribution of the authors:

Sagintayeva A. – sole author of the manuscript.

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Қазақстандағы университеттік көшбасшылық: сапалық тұрғыдан зерттеу

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстандағы университет көшбасшылығы және ұйымдастырудағы өзгерістерді сапалық тұрғыдан зерттеу әдіснамасының қиындықтары мен шешімдері қарастырылады. Зерттеуде өңірлік үш мемлекеттік университеттегі кейс-стадийлер негізге алынып, сапалық зерттеу дизайнының посткеңестік кезеңдегі мұралардан, мемлекеттік реформалардан, институциялық дербестік, интернационалдандыру және ұйымдық трансформациялардан қалыптасқан жоғары білім беру контексінде қалай құрылымдалғанына баса назар аударылған. Зерттеуде университет ректорларының, проректорлардың, директорлар кеңесінің мүшелерінің, декандар мен мемлекеттік органдар өкілдерінің институциялық өзгерістерді қалай түсіндіретінін зерделеу мақсатымен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар, фокус-топтар және құжаттарды талдау әдістері қолданылған. Мақала Қазақстандағы университет көшбасшылығын сапалық зерттеу әдіснамалық икемдікті, контекске терең бойлауды, жүйелі триангуляция мен зерттеушінің ұстанымына рефлексивті қатынасты талап ететінін нақты көрсетіп береді.

Түйін сөздер: сапалық зерттеу, әртүрлі кейс-стади, университет көшбасшылығы, ұйымдастырудағы өзгерістер, түсінік қалыптастыру, Қазақстан, жоғары білім.

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Университетское лидерство в Казахстане: качественное исследование

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются методологические трудности и исследовательские решения, связанные с проведением качественного исследования университетского лидерства и организационных изменений в Казахстане. Материал основан на множественном кейс-стади трех региональных государственных университетов. В центре внимания находится то, как качественный исследовательский дизайн был разработан в контексте высшего образования, сформированном государственными реформами, институциональной автономией, интернационализацией и ожиданиями организационной трансформации. В исследовании использовались полуструктурированные интервью, фокус-группы и анализ документов для изучения того, как ректоры университетов, проректоры, члены советов директоров, деканы и представители государственных органов интерпретировали институциональные изменения. Статья показывает, что качественное исследование университетского лидерства в Казахстане требует методологической гибкости, контекстной чувствительности, систематической триангуляции и рефлексивного отношения к позиции исследователя.

Ключевые слова: качественное исследование, множественное кейс-стади, университетское лидерство, организационные изменения, осмысление, Казахстан, высшее образование.

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