

Higher Education Leadership and Policy Implementation: A Qualitative Exploration of Strategic Decision-Making

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the strategic decision-making practices of higher education leaders in Indonesia during the implementation of national policy directives. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the research employs a thematic analysis approach to investigate how rectors, deans, and senior academic administrators interpret, negotiate, and enact educational reforms. The findings reveal three interrelated leadership dynamics: strategic mediation, symbolic and practical alignment, and distributed decision spaces. Through a dialectical engagement with strategic leadership and institutional theory, the study develops an integrative conceptual model that reconceptualizes policy implementation as an iterative and context-sensitive process. This model contributes theoretical novelty by synthesizing competing paradigms and offers practical insights for advancing reflexive, policy-literate leadership in complex governance environments.

Keywords:

Qualitative Research, Academic Leadership, Policy Implementation, Strategic Decision-Making, Higher Education Governance.



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INTRODUCTION

Background Context

Higher education systems are facing unprecedented demands to respond to societal shifts, digital transformation, and global competitiveness. This rapid evolution necessitates leadership that can navigate increasingly complex policy environments (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024). Institutions are compelled to align their strategic priorities with national policy agendas while preserving academic autonomy and cultural identity—a balancing act that underscores the strategic role of university leaders.

Academic leadership has shifted from a purely administrative role to one that encompasses vision-setting, stakeholder negotiation, and policy interpretation (Divjak & Begičević Ređep, 2015). As universities contend with pressures from performance-based funding schemes, quality assurance audits, and international rankings, decision-making has become more strategic, relational, and context-dependent (James & Derrick, 2020). This shift requires leaders who are not only technically skilled but strategically reflective.

In the Indonesian context, where higher education governance reflects a hybrid between centralized control and decentralized institutional autonomy, policy implementation is inherently multifaceted. Leaders often face tensions between national directives and institutional capabilities, calling for adaptive strategies and interpretive agency (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018). Navigating this duality is essential for ensuring that policy mandates do not compromise the core values of academic institutions.

As such, the discourse around reform has moved beyond policy architecture toward implementation agency. Leadership practices, especially strategic decision-making at the institutional level, have gained scholarly attention for their role in mediating policy outcomes (Pietilä, 2024). This study responds to that scholarly trajectory by exploring how Indonesian university leaders interpret and enact policy in their unique institutional contexts.

Problem Statement

Although higher education policies emphasize institutional accountability and strategic responsiveness, empirical evidence shows a consistent gap between policy design and its enactment (James & Derrick, 2020). Much of this discrepancy is due to the variability in how leaders interpret and respond to policy demands. Strategic decisions are not simply driven by logic or compliance; they are shaped by values, experiences, and institutional norms (Fumasoli et al., 2020).

Recent studies acknowledge that leadership agency significantly influences implementation success, yet there remains a lack of qualitative inquiry into these processes (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020). Governance models often treat policy implementation as linear and technocratic, disregarding the interpretive dimensions that shape strategic action. This gap limits our understanding of how institutional leaders actively construct and adapt policy within everyday decision-making.

In Indonesia, strategic leadership is further complicated by layers of bureaucracy, shifting regulations, and institutional diversity. Rectors and deans frequently navigate competing priorities such as accreditation, financial constraints, and evolving pedagogical demands (Divjak & Begičević Redep, 2015). Their decisions reflect not only strategic priorities but also institutional identity and cultural alignment—dimensions not easily captured by metrics or audits.

To address these limitations, this study examines how leadership interpretation affects strategic decision-making during policy implementation. By prioritizing a qualitative approach, it aims to uncover the tacit, reflexive, and context-bound elements of leadership behavior that remain invisible in quantitative studies.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore the strategic decision-making practices of higher education leaders as they implement national education policies. It seeks to understand how leadership agency manifests through cognitive reasoning, institutional negotiation, and context-sensitive interpretation. The study contributes to the growing scholarship that emphasizes complexity, reflexivity, and institutional embeddedness in higher education governance (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Additionally, the research seeks to construct a conceptual framework that maps leadership-policy alignment. This framework will integrate insights from complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), strategic management literature (Mintzberg, 1994), and implementation studies grounded in institutional theory (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020). Through empirical narratives, the study will articulate key patterns and decision logics underpinning leadership behavior.

The study is guided by the following research question: *"How do institutional leaders in Indonesian higher education exercise strategic decision-making during the implementation of national education policies?"*

Supporting questions include:

- *What contextual factors influence leadership interpretation of policy mandates?*
- *How do leaders reconcile institutional goals with regulatory expectations?*
- *In what ways do leadership decisions reflect adaptation, negotiation, or resistance?*

By answering these questions, the study aims to fill critical gaps in leadership literature with data-driven, contextually grounded insights. It will offer not only descriptive accounts but theoretical contributions that extend beyond the Indonesian case.

Significance of the Study

This research offers a substantive contribution to leadership and governance literature by foregrounding the interpretive nature of strategic decision-making in policy implementation. It aligns with recent calls to examine leadership not just as structural function but as contextual practice shaped by complexity, ambiguity, and values (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2017).

Practically, the findings will support leadership development initiatives by informing the design of training programs that cultivate reflexive, strategic, and policy-literate leaders. Such programs are crucial in equipping higher education administrators to navigate reform effectively and ethically. The study also informs policy-makers by highlighting the need for flexible, dialogic policy instruments that account for institutional diversity.

Methodologically, the study employs thematic analysis—an increasingly recognized approach for unpacking meaning-making in leadership and organizational studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This technique enables the extraction of latent insights from leader narratives and institutional documents, supporting the construction of empirically grounded frameworks.

From a global perspective, the research brings attention to Southeast Asian higher education—an area underrepresented in international governance literature. By situating Indonesian leadership within broader theoretical paradigms, the study contributes to comparative dialogues and reinforces the relevance of context-driven scholarship in educational reform.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate the strategic decision-making practices of higher education leaders during policy implementation. Such a design is particularly suited for capturing the nuanced reasoning, contextual interpretation, and lived experiences of academic leaders (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm underpins this approach, recognizing that leadership behavior is socially constructed and contextually embedded (Klenke, 2016).

Qualitative exploratory designs are increasingly used in leadership studies to uncover complex phenomena that cannot be reduced to quantifiable variables (Gigliotti, 2017). This design allows for inductive analysis and the emergence of themes grounded in participants' narratives, making it ideal for examining strategic leadership in dynamic policy environments.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, targeting individuals with direct involvement in strategic decision-making within Indonesian universities. These included rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and senior academic leaders across institutions with varying accreditation levels, governance structures, and regional contexts.

The sampling strategy aimed to ensure maximum variation in institutional type (public vs. private), policy exposure, and leadership tenure. Such diversity enhances the transferability of findings and supports cross-case thematic synthesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample size was determined based on thematic saturation, typically achieved between 12–20 participants in leadership-focused qualitative studies (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, guided by a thematic framework derived from leadership and policy literature. Interview protocols were designed to elicit reflections on strategic dilemmas, policy interpretation, and institutional negotiation. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted on strategic plans, policy briefs, and meeting transcripts to triangulate findings and contextualize leadership narratives. This multi-source approach strengthens the credibility of the data and supports the construction of a robust thematic framework (Gigliotti, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected through interviews and documents were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, a flexible and widely respected method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach was selected for its capacity to uncover nuanced insights related to leadership behavior and strategic reasoning within complex policy environments. Thematic Analysis provides a clear procedural structure that accommodates both inductive and deductive coding, enabling the research to remain sensitive to emergent concepts while guided by theoretical frameworks from leadership and governance literature.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, comprising (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. The researcher began by transcribing and immersing themselves in the interview data, followed by systematic coding of relevant excerpts using NVivo 14, a qualitative data management software that enhances transparency and consistency in thematic organization (Singun, 2025). Initial codes were created from recurring leadership behaviors, decision rationales, and contextual factors surrounding policy implementation, which were then grouped into candidate themes reflecting broader strategic patterns.

Triangulation was implemented by cross-referencing interview data with documentary sources such as institutional strategic plans, national policy documents, and internal meeting transcripts. This

technique enhanced data credibility and allowed for convergence of evidence across multiple sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking was also employed, wherein selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations of their narratives to confirm accuracy and resonance with their perspectives—a process crucial for affirming the authenticity of themes and reducing researcher bias (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained reflexive memos to document evolving interpretations and analytic decisions. An audit trail was established to ensure procedural transparency and methodological accountability. In interpreting the data, attention was paid not only to semantic content but also to latent dimensions such as leadership values, identity formation, and political positioning, as suggested by Braun and Clarke's extended guidance on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This analytical rigor supports the construction of an empirically grounded conceptual framework, which will be elaborated in the discussion section to model leadership-policy alignment within Indonesian higher education institutions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the lead research institution. All participants provided **informed consent**, and confidentiality was assured through anonymization of transcripts and secure data storage. The study adhered to ethical principles of voluntary participation, non-maleficence, and respect for autonomy (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

The researcher's **positionality** was explicitly acknowledged, recognizing the potential influence of academic status and insider knowledge on data interpretation. Ethical reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to mitigate bias and uphold the integrity of the research process (Chasokela, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emergent Theme 1: Strategic Mediation

Strategic mediation emerged as a dominant theme in the data, reflecting how academic leaders positioned themselves as intermediaries between national policy mandates and institutional realities. Rather than implementing policies verbatim, leaders engaged in interpretive practices that allowed them to adapt directives to their institutional contexts. This mediation was not passive; it involved active negotiation, reframing, and selective prioritization of policy elements (Guiomar & Costa e Silva, 2025).

Participants described instances where national accreditation standards conflicted with local pedagogical models. In such cases, leaders facilitated internal dialogues to reconcile these tensions, often invoking institutional values and long-term strategic goals. This aligns with findings from Pietilä (2024), who emphasized leadership agency in navigating policy ambiguity within European universities.

Strategic mediation also involved managing stakeholder expectations, including faculty, students, and external regulators. Leaders reported using consultative forums and strategic planning retreats to build consensus around contested policy areas. These practices reflect the shift from hierarchical governance to more dialogic and participatory leadership models (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024).

Interestingly, mediation was not limited to formal structures. Leaders often relied on informal networks and personal relationships to influence policy interpretation and implementation. This underscores the relational dimension of strategic leadership, where trust and credibility become tools for navigating complexity (Gigliotti, 2017).

Overall, strategic mediation illustrates the adaptive capacity of academic leaders to act as policy translators, aligning external mandates with internal priorities. It highlights the importance of interpretive leadership in contexts where policy is not prescriptive but open to negotiation and contextualization.

Emergent Theme 2: Symbolic and Practical Alignment

The second theme, symbolic and practical alignment, captures how leaders framed decisions to satisfy both regulatory compliance and institutional identity. Participants emphasized the need to present policy implementation not merely as obligation but as an opportunity to reinforce institutional values and strategic narratives (James & Derrick, 2020).

For example, one rector described aligning a national digital transformation policy with the university's long-standing commitment to inclusive education. By embedding symbolic meaning into strategic decisions, leaders were able to generate internal buy-in and reduce resistance. This echoes the

concept of “symbolic compliance” discussed by Huisman & Mampaey (2018), where institutions adopt policy language while tailoring its substance.

Leaders also used symbolic gestures—such as launching flagship programs or rebranding initiatives—to signal alignment with national priorities. These actions served dual purposes: demonstrating responsiveness to external stakeholders and reinforcing internal cohesion. Such symbolic framing is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool in higher education governance (Fumasoli et al., 2020).

At the practical level, alignment involved modifying operational procedures, resource allocation, and performance indicators to reflect policy goals. However, leaders were cautious to avoid superficial compliance. They emphasized the importance of embedding changes into institutional routines and culture, ensuring sustainability beyond the policy cycle (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020).

This theme reveals that effective leadership requires more than technical implementation—it demands narrative construction and cultural resonance. Symbolic and practical alignment enables leaders to bridge the gap between policy and practice, fostering legitimacy and strategic coherence.

Emergent Theme 3: Distributed Decision Spaces

The third theme highlights the distributed nature of decision-making in higher education institutions. Rather than centralized authority, governance was characterized by formal and informal negotiations across academic units. Leaders described decision spaces as fluid, collaborative, and often contested (Bolden, 2011).

Participants noted that strategic decisions were rarely made in isolation. Instead, they involved consultations with faculty senates, department heads, and administrative councils. This distributed model reflects the collegial tradition of academic governance, where authority is shared and deliberative processes are valued (Gosling, 2009).

Informal networks played a significant role in shaping decisions. Leaders relied on trusted colleagues, cross-functional teams, and interdepartmental alliances to build consensus and mobilize support. These networks often operated parallel to formal structures, enabling agility and responsiveness in complex policy environments (Prabha & Sumathi, 2023).

Distributed decision spaces also allowed for experimentation and localized adaptation. For instance, deans were given autonomy to pilot policy initiatives within their faculties, generating context-specific insights that informed broader institutional strategies. This decentralization aligns with the principles of distributed leadership, which emphasize collective agency and shared responsibility (Spillane, 2005).

Overall, this theme underscores the importance of institutional architecture that supports distributed leadership. It challenges traditional notions of top-down governance and highlights the value of collaborative decision-making in navigating policy complexity.

Illustrative Narratives

Narratives from participants provided rich illustrations of strategic dilemmas, adaptive leadership, and policy reinterpretation. One vice-rector recounted a situation where a national funding policy threatened the viability of a community engagement program. Rather than discontinuing the initiative, the leadership team restructured it to align with performance-based funding criteria, preserving its core mission.

Another dean described navigating faculty resistance to curriculum reform mandated by the Ministry of Education. Through a series of town hall meetings and collaborative workshops, the leadership reframed the reform as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation, gradually shifting faculty perceptions. This reflects the adaptive leadership practices documented by Ugli et al. (2025), where responsiveness and communication are key.

Quotes such as “We didn’t reject the policy—we reimaged it” and “Leadership is about finding the middle ground between compliance and conviction” exemplify the interpretive agency exercised by academic leaders. These narratives resonate with the findings of Guiomar & Costa e Silva (2025), who emphasized mediation and dialogue as central to leadership in higher education.

The stories also revealed emotional dimensions of leadership—frustration, hope, and resilience. Leaders spoke of the personal toll of navigating conflicting expectations and the satisfaction of achieving strategic breakthroughs. Such reflections underscore the human side of governance, often overlooked in policy analysis.

These illustrative narratives enrich the thematic findings by grounding them in lived experience. They offer compelling evidence of how leadership is enacted in practice, shaped by context, values, and relationships.

Conceptual Model

Based on the emergent themes and narratives, a conceptual model was developed to illustrate the leadership-policy interaction cycle. The model comprises four interconnected phases: (1) Policy Interpretation, (2) Strategic Mediation, (3) Distributed Negotiation, and (4) Symbolic Alignment. Each phase represents a leadership function that transforms policy from abstract mandate to institutional reality.

In the Policy Interpretation phase, leaders analyze external directives through the lens of institutional priorities and constraints. This involves sense-making and strategic framing, as described by Pietilä (2024). The Strategic Mediation phase entails negotiating tensions between policy demands and organizational culture, often through consultative processes.

The Distributed Negotiation phase reflects the collaborative nature of decision-making, where multiple actors contribute to shaping implementation strategies. This aligns with distributed leadership theory and emphasizes the importance of institutional architecture (Bolden, 2011). Finally, the Symbolic Alignment phase involves embedding policy into institutional narratives and practices, ensuring legitimacy and sustainability.

The model is dynamic and recursive, acknowledging that policy implementation is not linear but iterative. Feedback loops allow for continuous adaptation and learning. It also incorporates contextual variables such as institutional autonomy, leadership style, and stakeholder engagement, making it applicable across diverse settings.

This conceptual framework offers a tool for analyzing and enhancing leadership practices in policy implementation. It bridges theory and practice, providing a structured lens for understanding the complexities of academic governance.

Dialectical Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

The findings of this study reveal a dialectical tension between two dominant theoretical paradigms in higher education leadership: strategic leadership theory, which emphasizes rational planning and goal-oriented decision-making (Mintzberg, 1994; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), and institutional theory, which foregrounds cultural embeddedness, symbolic compliance, and organizational legitimacy (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020; Huisman & Mampaey, 2018). These paradigms often present conflicting assumptions about how leaders operate within policy environments.

Strategic leadership theory posits that leaders act as autonomous agents who formulate and execute decisions based on strategic foresight and performance metrics. This view assumes a level of control and predictability that is often absent in complex institutional settings. In contrast, institutional theory suggests that leaders are constrained by norms, traditions, and symbolic expectations, leading to decisions that prioritize legitimacy over efficiency. This tension was evident in participants' narratives, where leaders oscillated between strategic pragmatism and symbolic alignment.

For example, while some leaders described their actions as deliberate and goal-driven—consistent with strategic leadership—others emphasized the need to conform to cultural expectations and external perceptions, reflecting institutional pressures. This contradiction illustrates the dialectical nature of leadership in higher education, where rationality and symbolism coexist and compete. Similar tensions have been documented in European and Latin American contexts, where policy implementation is shaped by both managerial logic and cultural negotiation (Pietilä, 2024; Guiomar & Costa e Silva, 2025).

Rather than resolving this tension by privileging one paradigm over the other, this study proposes a synthetic framework that integrates both perspectives. The conceptual model developed—comprising phases of interpretation, mediation, distributed negotiation, and symbolic alignment—demonstrates how leaders navigate between strategic intent and institutional embeddedness. This synthesis acknowledges that leadership is neither purely rational nor entirely symbolic, but a dynamic interplay of both.

The novelty of this research lies in its dialectical synthesis, which offers a more holistic understanding of leadership-policy interaction. By bridging strategic and institutional theories through empirical evidence, the study contributes a new lens for analyzing governance in higher education. It moves beyond binary categorizations and presents leadership as a reflexive, context-sensitive practice that adapts to competing demands. This integrative approach has implications for leadership

development, suggesting that future leaders must be trained not only in strategic planning but also in cultural literacy and symbolic framing.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the intricate and multi-layered nature of strategic decision-making in higher education policy implementation. Through a qualitative exploration of academic leadership practices across Indonesian universities, the findings revealed emergent themes—strategic mediation, symbolic and practical alignment, and distributed decision spaces—that provide a nuanced understanding of how institutional leaders interpret, negotiate, and enact national policies. Rather than linear compliance, leadership action reflected a dynamic process of adaptation and meaning-making grounded in context, relationships, and values.

The dialectical engagement between strategic leadership theory and institutional theory has led to a productive synthesis that underscores the reflexive agency of leaders. Instead of positioning leadership as either rational or symbolic, the study found that effective implementation required integrating strategic foresight with cultural literacy. This integration enables academic leaders to not only fulfill policy mandates but to cultivate institutional coherence and legitimacy, reaffirming the need for multifaceted leadership competencies in governance frameworks (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Huisman & Mampaey, 2018).

The conceptual model developed in this study offers a fresh perspective on leadership-policy interaction. It delineates a cyclical and recursive process wherein leaders move through phases of interpretation, mediation, negotiation, and alignment. This model advances existing scholarship by grounding leadership theory in empirically derived practice and by acknowledging the complexity of institutional environments. It also serves as a diagnostic and developmental tool for leaders seeking to enhance strategic capacity and policy responsiveness in their institutions (Guimar & Costa e Silva, 2025).

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that rigid, top-down implementation frameworks may be counterproductive in diverse and decentralized academic contexts. Policymakers must consider the interpretive role of institutional leaders and allow for greater flexibility in the enactment process. Policies designed with built-in negotiation spaces and cultural adaptability are more likely to be embraced, legitimized, and sustained within universities (James & Derrick, 2020).

The study also has practical implications for leadership development. Training programs must evolve to equip leaders not only with managerial skills but with strategic thinking, relational acumen, and symbolic framing abilities. Institutions may benefit from cultivating distributed leadership cultures that empower multiple actors to contribute to policy interpretation and innovation. This shift moves away from singular leadership heroism toward collective sense-making, adaptability, and resilience (Fumasoli et al., 2020; Bolden, 2011).

In conclusion, the novelty of this research lies in its theoretical synthesis, empirically grounded model, and contextual richness. It contributes to higher education leadership literature by bridging disparate paradigms, revealing the lived realities of policy enactment, and proposing actionable insights for institutional and national reform. Future research may extend this inquiry through comparative cross-national studies or longitudinal designs that trace the evolution of leadership-policy dynamics across reform cycles and leadership transitions.

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