



# **Universities, Science Systems and Women's Leadership of Higher Education Institutions in Africa**

**Methodology Paper**

**Author: Olawale Ismail**

This paper is a part of an African Leadership Centre Research project supported by the  
International Development Research Centre

## Introduction

This methodology paper sets out the research strategy and broad outlines of the ontological and epistemological approaches that underpin this project. It provides an outline of techniques, tools, procedures, and processes for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, and how to convert data into evidence. Through this, it lays out and interprets the nature of the research problem (and questions), overview of methodological assumptions, range of data and methods for testing and modifying assumptions, and the way knowledge relates to intervention (problem-solving).

The project adopts an integrative approach that is qualitative and interpretivist in character in line with the dialectical nature of the research problem, especially the historical, socio-cultural, political-economic and power hierarchies embedded with issues of gendered dynamics of leadership processes of HEIs in Africa. The interpretivist approach analyses social phenomenon (the gendered dynamics of leadership of HEIs in Africa) in their natural context using a case study strategy, based on the beliefs, norms, and values of the culture of the society in which it takes place. The interpretivist approach emphasizes the perspectives of key actors, especially women in HEIs and science systems, and other stakeholders, including administrators, lawmakers, etc. It also prioritises the subjective nature of social phenomenon and speaks to the idea of gendered hierarchies in society and institutions, including HEIs, as socially constructed, reinforced, and interpreted by individuals based on their respective experiences.

The integrative approach is rooted in critical gender studies and methodologies that focuses on underlying power relations and structures of society that prepositions certain genders, and normalizes certain gender roles, norms, and expectations in ways that disadvantages women in leadership processes and positions in society and institutions, including HEIs in Africa. The integrative approach gives salience to gender as a cultural construct and its decisive impact in social relations. It traces the implications of gender, looking at the ways in which it defines identities, and helps to shape the gathering of data and interpretations other societies. The openness to diverse realities and explanations and varieties of truths helps to illuminate the dynamics of a male-oriented default system that shapes outcomes and realities of leadership processes and positions. It means the data and knowledge to be gathered in this project are to be engendered – “The project of engendering knowledge requires that the study of other societies, including their gender relations and ideologies, be carried out with scrupulous examination of ourselves as gendered identities. This means continuing scrutiny of the submerged power relations in the discourses and concrete practices of our own society as well.”<sup>1</sup>

The adopted interpretivist approach follows analytic induction that puts forward initial formulations and explanation of the research problem and questions based on a comprehensive review of extant literature, followed by selected case studies to test and /or reformulate the initial explanations, extraction of actionable knowledge and interventions (pilot) to effect change. As such, the methodology for this project has four layers or elements, namely, the interpretivist framework, review of extant literature and the formulation of testable explanations, testing and interrogation of testable explanations in selected case studies, and design of training modules informed by findings from the research.

---

<sup>1</sup> Callaway, H. (1992). Ethnography and experience: gender implications in fieldwork and texts” in Okely & Callaway 1992: 30.

The rest of this paper is divided into six parts, including sections on the summary of the project, integrative framework, interpretivist approach, underlying research propositions, case study strategy involving empirical data collection via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and action research. There are also sections on research ethics, specifically positionality and reflexivity, and data collection methods.

## Project Summary

The research project interrogates gender dynamics, especially gendered inequalities in the leadership of higher education institutions in Africa. The entry points are two-fold; the limited participation and inclusion of women in the leadership processes and positions of HEIs in Africa, and the seemingly enduring crises of most HEIs across Africa. The core goals of the projects are to build new knowledge that leads to a significant increase in women's leadership with a vision of transforming African university systems; with an institutionalized framework for inclusive leadership development; and a recognizable cohort of aspiring women leaders in the select African universities. The project's core objectives include generating context-specific knowledge that contributes to a more robust understanding of existing leadership capacity building and learning opportunities for women leaders in universities with a view of strengthening science systems in Africa. It also seeks to institutionalize a leadership development program for women on administrative and academic pipelines in select African universities; and to facilitate the development of a visible network (cohort) of women leaders engaged in collaborative visioning and problem-solving in African universities.

The project is guided by the overarching research question – How do the gendered dynamics of leadership structures and leadership development processes shape the prospect of women's leadership of higher education institutions in Africa? When disaggregated, there are three operational (secondary) research questions that are posed across the four case studies of this project. They include the following:

- 1) How is the underpinning logic of leadership and leadership development in higher education systems in Africa gendered?
- 2) What needs to change in the logic, structures, and leadership development processes in higher education institutions in order to ensure equal leadership opportunities for women in science systems in Africa?
- 3) What channels of influence exist for leader emergence outside of the formal or recognized leadership progression pathways, which privilege women and men alike?

The project makes three assumptions and interrelated diagnoses; first is that women face structural and cultural barriers to leadership in science systems, including within the African university. This parallels the realities in other sectors of society and on which significant literature exists. Second is the dominant, yet skewed approach to and understanding of leadership from the perspective of position-based power, as opposed to leadership as a process and tool of transformation. The focus on people occupying formal positions limits the imagination and potential of where and how women can exercise influence and impact change. Third is the neglect of investment and attention paid by the university ecosystem to official pathways to leadership and other channels of influence, particularly for women.

This project is underpinned by the possibility and plausibility of a nexus between the crisis in higher education institutions in Africa and the lack of gender diversity in the leadership structures, and the possibility of women's inclusion in the leadership of science systems in leading to different outcomes,

including mitigating crisis. The rise of women to senior roles in universities is essential for strengthening processes for change that are transformational as well as building a critical mass to lead the guard. Women have the possibility and capacity for transformative change due to inherent qualities often attributed to female leaders; consultative approaches and strong emphasis on building mutuality have been linked to more transformational leadership approaches.

The project notes that African universities serve and embody multiple realities; on the one hand, they are sites for training researchers for Africa's science systems and other leadership positions and are central to the socioeconomic and political development of the continent through the production of knowledge in various disciplines including STEM subjects as well as behavioural and management sciences. On the other hand, HEIs are also historical artefacts and sites of contestations, inequality, and multiple forms of gendered exclusions. The project is guided by the assumption (to be tested) that structural factors and organizational culture have created a glass ceiling barring women's ascendance to top leadership positions in many African universities. Some of the specific barriers to women's progress and leadership in science systems include cultural and institutional biases, the neglect of leadership mentorship, and pervasive and robust patriarchal and exclusionary networks and slower career paths for women because of their multiple roles, and broader societal gender inequalities.

### Methodological Orientation: Integrative Approach

This project uses an integrative approach that combines elements of qualitative and quantitative elements, though the overarching approach is qualitative on account of the focus on gendered dynamics of leadership processes in HEIs. The integrative approach emphasizes the diverse nature of social reality, combines qualitative and quantitative data, prioritizes the integration of data from multiple sources, and places a premium on the formulating conceptual abstractions and assumptions that are subjected to real-life testing using selected case studies. The integrative approach is necessitated by the complexities of gender issues and power relations, including gendered power inequalities in society and how it percolates different institutions, including HEIs. Admittedly, while no methodology can guarantee the truth regarding the forces shaping people's relations, including power relations in HEIs administration, we can only have partial truths or versions of truth. Yet, awareness of relations, positioning, and an understanding of specific historical relations of power, dialogue and dominance could help illuminate the world and reveal the underlying assumption of different version of the truth regarding gendered inequalities in the leadership of HEIs.<sup>2</sup>

The overarching qualitative nature and approach for this project does not preclude the use of quantitative data and elements, including data on years of service, career pathways, measures of career promotion and progress for males and females in HEIs, data on performance-related measures, etc. Most robust studies in the social sciences tend to combine the "use of both quantitative and qualitative steps in their procedures. A typical quantitative study starts with certain qualitative concepts that are then operationalized and converted into concrete and measurable terms called variables or factors. These operationalized terms are measured using one or more of several scales of measurement such as nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio scales and their associated statistical tests."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Roth, P. (1989). Ethnography without tears, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 30(5); 559.

<sup>3</sup> Shiraz, B. (2015). Integrative Research: Integral Epistemology and Integrative Methodology. *Integral Review*, Vol.11(1); 23.

The choice of integrative methodology is informed by the use of ontological assumptions about leadership processes of HEIs and broader society in Africa, underpinned by patriarchal power hierarchies and gender inequalities. The assumptions point to the multi-dimensionality (multiple causes and factors) of gendered inequalities of leadership positions and processes of HEIs, as well as generalised (cross-country) and case study-specific issues in the exclusion of women in the leadership of HEIs in Africa.

The integrative methodology adapted for this project is underpinned by four ontological and epistemological principles<sup>4</sup>: first is that reality (gendered inequalities of leadership of HEIs) is a multi-dimensional whole where diverse issues and manifestations are expressions of underlying power structures, and structural imbalances (structural violence). Structural violence here refers to official and unofficial rules, structures, practices, and customs that privileges particular gender categories over the others, and which prevents disadvantaged groups from fulfilling their full potentials.<sup>5</sup>

Second is the reality of holistic truths that is based on the integration of data and evidence (truths) across different levels and sources of information and consciousness. This points to matching inferences, triangulating data, and information to confirm interpretations, check biases, and arrive at robust findings and conclusions. Truth here become a product of a rigorous analysis, the integration of data and information.

Third is that highly integrated data and information (consciousness) acknowledges the duality of experiences and perspectives, between the subject and object of experiences, and this duality reflects the divided nature and perspectives of reality, including the factors and explanations of gendered dynamics of leadership of HEIs in Africa. Still, the duality narrows or is eliminated through the high level integration of data to arrive at robust truth.

Fourth is that symbolic abstractions derived from hunches, perceptions, common knowledge, or opinion, and even findings from literature reviews are neither enough nor capable of representing the whole reality. The ontological nature of truth is that it transcends concepts and conceptual abstractions and must be grounded in reality, and empirical testing and confirmation.<sup>6</sup> There is a requirement for such abstractions to be tested in the real world through selected case studies to see the extent to which they hold true, offer opportunities for modifications and reformulations, for generalizability across multiple cases whilst retaining context-specificities.

## Interpretivist Paradigm

The favoured integrative approach is underpinned by interpretivist logic due to the focus on gendered inequalities and unequal power relations in leadership positions and processes in HEIs in Africa. Interpretivism allows this project to gather and analyse data that is difficult or impossible to measure, understand or analyse in quantitative ways. The research focus is anchored on the assumption that leadership and associated power and influence are shaped by social contexts and human experiences, and are connected with social construction or reinforced and normalised by socially constructed and culturally adapted practices. Interpretivism allows the project and its empirical assessment to correctly

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid; 18.

<sup>5</sup> See Vorobej, M. (2008). Structural Violence. *Peace Research*, 40(2), 84–98.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23607799>

<sup>6</sup> Shiraz (2015); 23.

determine the meanings of certain actions, events, and manifestations, including gender dimensions of leadership processes and positions of HEIs through the prism and context of societal culture, norms, and beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Through this, the study seeks to make sense of the gendered dynamics of leadership processes in HEIs. Moreover, different actors and stakeholders have multiple perspectives, and interpretations of the meanings, requirements, and identities of those that should constitute or occupy leadership positions in HEIs, thus reflecting gendered power relations and inequalities in wider societies in Africa.

Interpretivism prioritises analytic induction whereby context-specific case studies are combined or translated into generalisations through comparing inferences across data. It typically involves the formulation of explanations informed by literature review, followed by testing of such formulation through case study interrogation to confirm relevance or modification of explanations until a universal relationship is established.<sup>8</sup> This allows assumptions, facts and empirical data, observations, concepts, propositions, and theory to be closely aligned, logically connected, and tested, and become the bases for actionable knowledge.

The six stages of analytic induction include the following:

- 1) A rough definition of the phenomenon (gendered dynamics of leadership processes in HEIs) to be explained or formulated.
- 2) A hypothetical explanation of gendered dynamics of leadership processes in HEIs based on literature review.
- 3) Three case studies for in-depth analysis in the light of the hypothesis with the goal of determining if hypothesis fits the fact of the case or not.
- 4) If hypothesis fails, it is either reformulated or phenomenon is redefined so that the case(s) is excluded.
- 5) Practical certainty obtainable if a small number of cases has been examined, but the discovery of negatives disproves the explanation and requires reformulation.
- 6) Process of examining cases, redefining phenomenon and reformulating hypotheses is continued until a universal relationship is established.<sup>9</sup>

In line with the integrative approach, the choice of interpretivist methodology does not preclude the collection and use of qualitative and quantitative data, though analytic induction remains the core approach to interpreting data and making sense of leadership processes in HEIs in Africa. The interpretivist logic allows this project and data collection and interpretation to undertake cross-cultural, cross-context comparisons of gender issues in the leadership processes and positions in HEIs in at least three HEIs in Africa. It also allows the project to explore in-depth analysis and cross-country and cross-HEIs differences in institutions, ethics, leadership systems and factors shaping leadership processes.<sup>10</sup>

There are four elements of the interpretivist approach used for this project. First is the use of theoretical sampling whereby the choice of respondents and interviewees reflect their relevance to theories and assumptions underlying the project. The selection of respondents is guided by certain characteristics such as gender identity, roles, and positions in the HEIs, knowledge and expertise on

---

<sup>7</sup> Collins, H. (2010) "Creative Research: The Theory and Practice of Research for the Creative Industries." London: AVA Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Silverman, D. (1985) *Qualitative Methodology and Sociology. Describing the Social World.* England: Gower, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, M.D. (2008) "Qualitative Research in Business & Management" London: SAGE Publications, p.11.

higher education institutions in Africa, prior or current roles in HEIs, experience of unequal gender relations and structural violence in leadership processes and positions in HEIs in selected case studies. The emphasis here is not sample representativeness but on sample relevance to theoretical assumptions.

Second is the acknowledgement of the role of the researcher/research team in the research process. Here, the researchers are considered internal to the research, specifically as part of the university ecosystem (participant observer). This allows the project to note the positionality (identity, roles, and experience) of the researcher in relation to the research problem, including possible biases, and how the identity of the researcher could be a factor in data collection and analysis. This project has deliberately included a researcher from the case studies (HEIs) in the respective teams as an insider with good knowledge of the official and unofficial channels of power and influence, historical understanding of leadership selection processes and career pathways in HEIs to enrich the research process.

Third is the emphasis on contextualising analysis using case studies from which context-specific inferences are drawn, as well as cross-cutting dynamics are discerned and collated as basis for intervention to initiate change. The emphasis on each context of research seeks to explore the nexus between language, signs, beliefs, and meanings and perspectives of participants, and practices of leadership in HEIs. This explains the choice of theoretical samples, including past and serving women in leadership positions in HEIs, women academics, researchers on gender issues, feminist scholars, university administrators, etc.

Fourth is in-project, in-research learning wherein data collection and analysis happen simultaneously. This speaks to the action research aspect of the project and the methodology. Simultaneous analysis and learning gives the project the requisite flexibility to amend its survey instruments, interview questions and techniques, choice of respondents, etc. as events (opportunities and constraints) evolve over the course of the research. This makes the research and researcher to respond to case study dynamics, opportunities to contextualise each case study to reflect unique attributes, adjust to the socio-cultural realities, language, culture, beliefs, and sensitivities of each HEIs and country. This minimises the risk of failure or unusable knowledge.

## Theoretical Propositions

The ALC research project team has undertaken a rigorous literature review through which baseline propositions have been generated for the study. It is expected that each case study research team would adapt these generic propositions to reflect the peculiarities of their HEI whilst retaining core elements of the overall study. The literature review has been in two phases; first was the set of propositions embedded in the original project proposal, and second has been a baseline literature review/framing paper undertaken in the first phase/year of the project (see list of project documents). In the initial proposal, the following assumptions/propositions were made (and still relevant as they speak to underlying structural issues in the lack of women inclusion in the leadership processes and positions in HEIs in Africa).

1. The barriers to women's progress and leadership in science systems include cultural and institutional biases, the neglect of leadership mentorship, and pervasive and robust patriarchal and exclusionary networks – the 'old boys club'. Others are slower career paths for women because of their multiple roles, and broader societal gender inequalities.

2. Also, much of the global discourse around leadership has focused on men and male leadership within and outside of the academy. This has led to leadership theorists attempting to delineate and conflate the qualities that constitute good leadership with male behaviours and characteristics, as the standards against which women leaders are measured. The outcome has been that the female gender role is ostensibly seen as inconsistent with mainstream ideas on leadership roles. Women have therefore been locked out of positions of power and influence because they conform less to male leadership standards, and their reluctance to participate in competitive and self-promotional behaviour associated with dominant masculinities.
3. The debate has also largely focused on leadership as position and leadership as results or outcomes, thus confining the discussion to individuals as opposed to processes in which more than one person participates and exercises a measure of agency, and as a result, leadership occurs. The result of this is that situations or contexts where women are involved are not counted/measured, and therefore women are assumed to not participate in leadership.

In the expanded literature review, the following assumptions and propositions emerged:

4. Education attainment: It has been widely noted that more and more females are enrolled and participating in higher education, in some instances making up more numbers than their male peers in terms of attainment. Across other regions including parts of Asia, there are similar trends in terms of this attainment. Findings from the *Women in Higher Education; has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities (2021)* report indicate that while women are overrepresented in tertiary education enrolment in 74 percent of the countries studied, including at regional level, in Central and Southern Asia parity has been achieved whereas in Sub Saharan Africa men remain over-represented in this area. Another evident set of patterns is around the lag in women's attainment of postgraduate degrees (masters, doctorates). These are noted to be at a much lower levels than for males.
5. Participation in the academic labour force: higher education attainment is not translating to women's representation in particular academic positions or leadership roles within the higher education sector. This is a pattern noticed across other contexts where women are also evidently found in lower-level positions or roles. In the 2021 UNESCO report, it was also found that women are overrepresented at lower education levels in terms of teaching and have a low presence in upper secondary and tertiary sectors. Similar trends (low representation) are also seen in school management and education policymaking and decision-making positions.
6. Women in academic faculty roles: Against this background, the review briefly highlights some of the global trends around women's leadership in higher education. Across many of the existing studies on this topic, it is evident that women are concentrated more at the lower rungs of the academic ladder, holding academic staff (faculty) posts or lower management positions.
7. Women in Senior leadership roles: While these are recognisable and commendable gains in many of these contexts, the evident absence of women at top management or senior leadership positions cannot be overlooked. What is apparent is that there is 'glass ceiling' to those positions when looked at against the backdrop of female representation in academia. Although women are present as academic staff, a look at the figures in terms of professorial roles points to stark gaps.
8. Barriers to women's leadership: across the literature, there are several factors that have been attributed to the gaps found in women holding senior leadership positions in higher education. This includes colonial legacies, socio cultural, organizational structures, economic, and political differences.



- a. *Colonial legacies*: The discourse on higher education and the creation of universities in many African countries cannot be understood without their context and environment, and are as much shaped by their internal process as they are by their national contexts. As such, these institutions cannot be understood without looking at the role of history or indeed the colonial period. The latter has played a role in the ways in which these universities have been structured and operate, not least even decades after.
- b. *Personal barriers*: A final set of factors noted to affect women's ascension in to positions of leadership can be understood as the personal or individual factors. These can also be linked to the wider gender stereotypes that are held. In this regard, often this can also be seen as the women internalising some of these perceptions. Nguyen explains this as micro level; noting that the internalisation of barriers can also explain this underrepresentation. Tomaz et al explain this as internal related barriers; where there is an internalisation of limitations imposed by gender roles.
- c. *Nature of the environment*: bearing the above in mind, it is clear why some of the patterns that continue to persist today exist. Based on this, is the next set of linked barriers which can be understood as the gender stereotypes and practices weaved into the cultural and traditional perception toward women. Onoride and Perumal maintain that the 'social and political inequalities are endorsed through cultural and traditional practices and thus reflect in all sectors including higher education.' Looking closely to the gendered barriers, these are like what is noted in the broader global context. In this regard, women continue to be viewed through the traditional lens of being homemakers and carers.
- d. *Socio-cultural barriers*: in almost every context, the advancement of women across all sectors has been impacted by existing social and cultural structures. Even in countries where much progress around gender has been made, the deep-rooted patriarchal structures have and continue to play a role in shaping the extent to which women can and do advance.
- e. *Organisational structures*: another set of barriers as found across the literature are those imposed by the higher institutions settings themselves. Kruse's research on women holding positions as 'Chairs' is particularly noteworthy. She maintains that the 'barriers to women's advancement and success are baked into the structure of higher education'. That is, the 'individual and cultural barriers women face are further aggravated by the structure of the organizational system itself. The structures of universities which were built to favour men, are barriers to women looking to leadership and management roles. Moreover, the 'balance of power is in favour of men in many organisations despite women's presence and participation in the workforce having increased.

## Case Study Strategy

Within the integrative and interpretivist orientations of this project, a case study strategy is used to deepen and test the assumptions and propositions guiding the study. A case study allows the research to catch the peculiarities and complexities of each case and multiple cases allows for cross-case comparisons and generalisable knowledge. The case study strategy ensures the study interrogates the gendered dimensions of leadership of HEIs in Africa in the context of each institution and across the selected cases – "it investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially

when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”<sup>11</sup> Each case study enables the interrogation of gendered dynamics of leadership processes and positions within the history, socio-cultural foundation, norms and belief systems, institutional traditions and practices, and respondents perspectives. A case study represents “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.”<sup>12</sup> Each case study transcends being a sample, rather the cases represents an expansion of the study and opportunity to generalise findings and analysis. The choice of three case studies for this research makes a layered approach possible by building case studies that may include critical incidents and case studies of specific bound activities, and the overarching goal is to draw qualitative analysis by presenting specific cases and drawing thematic analysis or patterns across cases.<sup>13</sup>

The utility of the case study strategy extends beyond in-depth study of each case to also include the opportunity to combine specificity with generalisability; to cope with the “technically distinctive situation where many more variables of interest that those which data points. Thus, case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, using triangulation to cross-check and confirm inferences, interpretation and relationship between events and observations.”<sup>14</sup> The process of linking data and inferences to propositions and moving from context-specific findings to generalised outcomes is guided by “pattern-matching”- where several pieces of information from the same case study or across case studies relate to (apply) some theoretical propositions.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a coherence in combining integrative approach with interpretivism and case study, especially in formulating propositions that guide data collection, and which are subjected to testing, modification, or reformulation on account of in-depth case study research. For instance, the five components/steps of case study research is like the principles of interpretivism; the five steps of case study research as developed by Yin (1994) are as follows:

- a) a study or research question.
- b) its propositions, if any.
- c) its unit(s) of analysis.
- d) the logic of linking the data to the propositions, and
- e) the criteria for interpreting the findings.<sup>16</sup>

Four case studies have been selected for this project, namely the University of Nairobi (Kenya), Maseno University (Kenya), University of Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe) and the University of Pretoria (South Africa). The cases were selected after initial literature review, consultation with IDRC and ALC network of scholars and researchers, and standard criteria such as being HEIs, accessibility, availability of a resident researcher, and opportunity to undertake the research and prospect of research uptake. Some of the institutions also have previous and ongoing partnership with the ALC. More importantly, the cases have theoretical relevance to the research’s core questions and objectives; they have instances of limited women inclusion and participation in the leadership of HEIs.

The inquiry into each case study is anchored by a case study research team comprising of at least three persons, namely a university liaison, typically a senior academic in the HEI, a research lead that is either

---

<sup>11</sup> Yin, R. (1994) *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*, Second Edition. London: Sage Publications; 13.

<sup>12</sup> Patton, Micheal Quinn (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, Third Edition. London: Sage; 297.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid; 298.

<sup>14</sup> Yin (1994); 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid; 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 13.

a lecturer or senior lecturer/researcher in the HEI, and a research assistant that is at the level of a doctoral student or a master's degree holder. It is designed that at least two members of the research team would be women/females. Each case study research team liaises with the ALC project management/research team responsible for overall research coordination. Whilst each case study team is expected to follow the broad outlines and methodological template for the project, there is also an iterative process that gives sufficient flexibility to each case study team the opportunity to adapt the research process, including methodological template, methods and survey techniques to contextual opportunities and constraints. To this end, a methodology workshop was held for all case study teams and the ALC project/research team in Nairobi in June 2023 to collectively go through the outlines of the research methodology and commence the process of adaptation for each case study.

### ***Positionality and Reflexivity Issues***

The use of researchers from the case study HEIs raises ethical considerations linked to positionality and reflexivity. Positionality speaks to the interface between the identity of the researcher in relation to the research process and respondents – how the age, gender, ethno-religious backgrounds, political and geographical backgrounds, disciplinary orientations etc. are likely to affect the process of data collection and interpretation and dissemination (including the design and delivery of capacity training initiatives), through the imposition of biases and unsubstantiated perspectives. The researchers involved in this project are social beings with peculiar histories and backgrounds, socialisation, identities, perspectives, and values, and all this have the potential for intentional or unintentional interactions and influences on research process.<sup>17</sup>

Reflexivity on the other hand refers to “the orientations of the researcher will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them.”<sup>18</sup> It relates to conscious efforts to map the contours of biases and accounting (discounting) such during every stage of the research. Reflexivity is essential for understanding and navigating potential unintentional bias we hold that may impact our research.<sup>19</sup> Reflexivity allows for the clear identification of positionality issues, and it makes it essential for this research to enhance the validity, reliability, and outcomes (impacts) of this study.

As the respective case study research teams adapt the project's methodology and design their data collection techniques and templates, here is guidance and tips for ensuring reflexivity in the research process.

- 1) It is essential to identify your positionality before starting the research (during your planning) and in an ongoing way when conducting research.
- 2) Consider using a reflexivity journal to help you capture and reflect on what arises while analysing your results.
- 3) Positionality is not static and can change during your project, so engage in ongoing reflection on your relationship to your research, context, and participants.
- 4) Writing a positionality statement:
  - a. Make sure you devote sufficient time to writing a positionality statement.
  - b. An effective positionality statement will consider your personal and theoretical beliefs, as well as your identity (for example, age, background, ethnicity, and so on).

---

<sup>17</sup> Finlay, L., & Gough, B. (2008). *Reflexivity* (1st ed.). Wiley: 22.

<sup>18</sup> Hammersley, M & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London, Routledge; 16.

<sup>19</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. SAGE; 18.

- 5) Think about how your participants will perceive you, as this could affect their behaviour and responses.
- 6) Think about the kinds of findings emerging from your study, how they portray your respondents, how will respondents and institution perceive them, and the implications of research outputs.<sup>20</sup>

## Methods

In line with the case study strategy, the project will use three qualitative methods of data collection. The qualitative methods are essential to getting a deeper understanding, uncovering hidden meaning, and discerning complex patterns and ramifications of leadership processes and gender identities in HEIs in Africa.<sup>21</sup> The project employs a mixed methods approach to research and knowledge production. This approach involves the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data on leadership structures, positions and post-occupiers, and capacity development programs, and the perspectives of stakeholders. Data collection will involve desk-based collection and review of extant qualitative and quantitative data and literature, semi-structured interviews and /or focus group discussions with women academics and other stakeholders.

The case study research teams will work with university authorities, government oversight commissions on higher education, Ministries and MDAs on Education, academic labour unions and groups, lawmakers and policymakers, women in the academia, and other stakeholders to promote evidence-based analysis and interventions that promote women leadership development in science systems in Africa. This allows the project to gain a robust understanding of the research problem and questions in each context, and the opportunity to compare data and inferences across the four selected universities.

## **Literature Review**

The project will use desk-based research to gather and review extant data and literature on HEIs, including leadership systems and processes, record of past and present leaders and their gender identities, gender ratios of male and female academic broadly and in senior leadership positions and their disciplinary orientations, etc. This will also cover the review of extant laws and regulations governing higher education institutions (public and privately owned), regulatory framework, national and institutional gender policies, extant surveys, and data of HEIs on gender enrolment and attainment, etc.

The desk literature review will also explore (using extant records such as university reports, staff profiles and directories, and hiring and promotion exercises) mapping of women in the case study HEIs to identify and generate baseline data (knowledge) of women in leadership positions and their positions in the leadership hierarchies, as well as document women who aspire to leadership positions in the university system. Where there is insufficient extant data for this, this would be included in primary data collection through targeted surveys. The desk-based data collection and review will also cover and analyse administrative and academic policies and procedures of the case study HEIs, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Adapted from Shepherd, J., Noble, E. & Parkin, J. (07 Nov 2022). Positionality and reflexivity for early career researchers and postgraduate researchers. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/positionality-and-reflexivity-for-early-career-researchers-and-postgraduate-researchers>

<sup>21</sup> Silverman, D. (2000). Doing Qualitative Research. A Practical Handbook. London: Sage; 8.

those by national oversight bodies (e.g. Ministries of Education). In addition, the case study research teams will seek permission to use archival materials to understand the evolution of each university, including colonial legacies and subsisting practices and the evolution of leadership structures and practices, map former leaders, identify periods of change and the drivers of such change, and to identify official and unofficial sources and channels of influence in the leadership of the case study HEIs.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are always essential to most qualitative inquiries, especially those focused on discerning meaning and practices, as opposed to behaviours.<sup>22</sup> Semi-structured interviews containing a combination of closed and open-ended questions, are central to the research's ability to understand the perspectives of respondents, map the dynamics of gender identities, including roles and norms, and the place of HEIs in societal cultural reproduction.

Semi-structured interviews will allow the study to explore, critique and understand the meaning which individuals, groups and institutions attach to leadership and leadership emergence in science systems, how women see themselves within the university eco-systems, career aspirations, perceptions of leadership qualifications, and the culture of leadership practices in HEIs. Through interviews, the research will explore the possibility of building mini case studies of selected women leaders (or aspiring or aspired leaders) to map their career trajectories, capabilities and trainings, range of interest in leadership positions or lack of interest, social networks for formal and informal channels of influence, and decisive issues and factors in their interests and aspirations. The career profiling could illuminate issues and factors that tip the scale in the aspiration and outcomes of women in HEIs.

It will enable the case study research teams to interrogate the historical dimensions of contemporary leadership structures and processes, and the interrogation of the broader societal context of leadership 'meaning-making' and practices in African universities, including its gendered dimensions. Through this, the project will gain invaluable insights into the factors that cause, drive, and sustain gendered inequalities in the leadership structures, culture, and processes of African universities. All this will foreground the transformative outcomes which can emerge from the inclusion of women in the leadership of science systems in African universities.

Women academics will be primary targets of empirical data collection, with emphasis on working with different categories and generations of aspiring women leaders in the selected HEIs. This will include early, mid-career, and senior women scientists, innovators, and women researchers. The women respondents will also be primary targets for the follow-on intervention (training and capacity building) – the women will be supported through training, mentoring, and networking opportunities. Nonetheless, the study will also interview other stakeholders, including the following:

- Serving leaders of HEIs, including vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, deans of faculty, registrars, bursars, members of senate and governing councils, etc.
- Former leaders of HEIs, including past deans of faculty, vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, registrars, bursars, etc.
- heads of labour unions and groups in universities, including academic staff unions and non-academic staff groups.

---

<sup>22</sup> Hastrup, K. (1992). 'Writing Ethnography; state of the art' in Okely, J & Callaway, H (eds), *Anthropology and Autobiography*, London, Routledge: 118.

- Former women leaders of HEIs in the case study universities and others (non-case study universities).
- Senior officials of oversight bodies for HEIs, including Ministries of Education, University Commissions, Governing Councils, etc.
- Officials of Women Agencies, Ministries and Commissions tasked with promoting affirmative actions and policies on gender equality.
- Academics and experts on gender issues.
- Civil society groups and activists on gender and women empowerment issues.

### ***Focus Group Discussion (FGD)***

Focus group sessions with different categories and generations of women in HEIs would help deepen the meaning and understanding of issues at the epicentre of gendered inequalities in the leadership of HEIs in Africa. Focus group session will enrich data and insights from semi-structured interviews as the case study research teams could test ideas (interpretations and perspectives from interviews and literature review), cross-check inferences, gauge needs and explore possible focus of training and capacity development, etc. This will be central to the project's objective of applied research in that the knowledge generated from the research will be used to design evidence-driven interventions (including training materials) to address the exclusion of women from leadership in higher education systems in Africa. The FGD session allows the study to observe and record group perspectives, debates, convergence (consensus) and divergence of views on gender/women dimensions of leadership issues in HEIs in Africa. The target for FGDs will be women of different categories, disciplines, and generations in selected case study HEIs. As with interviews, this will also include early, mid-career, and senior women scientists, innovators, and women researchers. The participants for FGDs will reflect theoretical sampling, identified through interviews, surveys, and snow-balling. It is envisaged that each FGDs could comprise a minimum of three participants and a maximum of six participants. Participants in FGDs will also be considered or recruited for the follow-on intervention (training and capacity building) on leadership development for women in HEIs in Africa.

### **Action Research**

This project is both a research and problem-solving initiative as it incorporates generating knowledge alongside institutionalizing (piloting) a leadership development program for women on administrative and academic pipelines in select African universities and facilitating the development of a visible network (cohort) of women leaders engaged in collaborative visioning and problem-solving in African universities. This points to translating the outputs from the research into action or intervention to address gendered inequalities in leadership processes of HEIs in Africa. This qualifies as a form of action research – a strategy for theory testing and intervention to trigger change in social phenomenon. Action research enables the simultaneous interrogation and solving of social phenomenon and issues.

The composition of case study research teams, including the involvement of at least two researchers from the listed HEIs, and targeting of women and men in leadership positions and with knowledge of the leadership selection process in HEIs reflects research-policy-practitioner collaboration or involvement. The study will involve stakeholders in the respective HEIs as researchers, facilitators, implementers, respondents/interviewees, trainees, enhances accessibility, acceptability, and openness to debates, alternative ideas and solutions in relation to the leadership processes of HEIs in

Africa. It also embeds the research within institutional cultures and needs with the prospect of promoting ownership and policy/organisational uptake down the line.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, action research is aimed at improving practice – promoting greater women capacity for and involvement in leadership processes and positions – in HEIs in Africa. Targeting key stakeholders in the HEIs and wider society, including policy actors, lawmakers and higher education regulatory bodies promotes stakeholder representation, helps to draw attention to the gendered dynamics of HEIs leadership, and triggers thinking and exploration of solutions or remedial action, or openness to solutions.<sup>24</sup>

The research process and research teams are social actors with interest in generating knowledge for change. The research process and its outputs constitute forms of intervention, designed to build the capacity of women, as well generate knowledge and awareness of underlying unequal power relations to bring about desired change in the leadership of HEIs in Africa. The key stages of action research have synergies with elements of interpretivism and case study strategy; for instance, the stages of action research include the following:

- a) Diagnoses – identifying and defining a social phenomenon in its context.
- b) Action planning – identifying alternative solutions and options based on theory or research findings.
- c) Action taking or intervention – implementation of outputs from a research, including training and capacity building initiatives.
- d) Evaluation – assessing the scope of change or impact made, if any, in altering the course of action or social phenomenon involved or to see if theorized effects are realised in practice.
- e) Learning – critical reflection and review of action and social phenomenon to generate insights for improvements in the future.<sup>25</sup>

The ALC will leverage its theoretical and practical expertise on leadership, including the design and delivery of leadership training and capacity building programmes to translate the key outputs from each case study and generalized findings from the case studies into a training module/manual. As noted in the original project proposal, the ALC's unique approach to leadership development will be of vital importance in shaping the discourse on university leadership and in developing a vision and a framework for inclusive (greater women's participation) university leadership. The ALC has a track record of generating knowledge and training over 130 next generation African scholars and early and mid-career women in leadership and issues at the nexus of peace, security, and development. The work of the ALC has resulted in and benefitted from wide ranging networks of higher education, research, policy, and practice institutions across the continent and beyond. Moreover, the ALC has strong partnerships with universities and university networks in Africa, including the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA).

---

<sup>23</sup> Hammersley, M. (2004). Action research: a contradiction in terms? *Oxford Review of Education*, 30, 2, 165–181, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, K. (2018) Action research: Theory and practice, in Editor(s): Kirsty Williamson, and Graeme Johanson, *Research Methods (Second Edition)*, Chandos Publishing, 212.

<sup>25</sup> Susman, G.I. and Evered, R.D. (1978). "An Assessment of the Scientific Merits of Action Research," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (23), 582-603.