

The role, characteristics and perspectives of digital leaders in higher education [abstract only]

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Title

The role, characteristics and perspectives of digital leaders in higher education

Abstract

This study explores the role of leadership in advancing digital transformation within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, with a particular focus on the strategic integration of digital learning to realise institutional visions for teaching and learning. The study is situated in a post-pandemic context where digital learning has become integral to pedagogical practice. While leadership is not the sole driver of digital transformation, it plays a pivotal role as an enabler through advocacy, role modelling, and strategic vision. Leadership is not the only factor that influences digital transformation, but buy-in, role modelling, and advocacy by leaders is understood to be a significant enabler. This paper addresses two central research questions: What is the role of leadership in digital transformation in HE? And what are the characteristics and perspectives of leaders engaged in this transformation?

By 'leaders' we include all levels of leadership within the organisation, including student leaders as co-producers and partners. Bringing more diverse perspectives together gives outcomes that are much greater than the sum of the constituent parts. The inclusion of diverse leadership perspectives, including student leaders as co-producers and partners, is anticipated to enhance innovation, accountability, and shared ownership of the challenges of change. Having a greater involvement of stakeholders in development of services can increase accountability and ownership of the services while also improving perceptions of the quality delivered and resulting in more innovative outcomes.

The research adopted a qualitative methodology to examine how leadership influences and responds to digital change in an uncertain and complex higher education landscape with evolving expectations. Leaders from across academic, administrative, and student domains participated in structured workshops using table-top dialogue sheets to capture baseline perceptions, understandings, and strategic considerations related to digital transformation. The research is grounded in participative action research principles, recognising the dual roles of researchers as both stakeholders and analysts. This approach supports reflective practice and transparency in the interpretation of findings.

Data collection (supported by formal institutional ethical approval) involved written contributions to dialogue sheets and audio recordings of workshop discussions involving 43 participants who were predominantly staff and students at the host institution (n=34) with additional representation from different higher education providers and partners (n=9). Thematic analysis was conducted, and initial key themes are identified: the importance of leaders embracing change and navigating its

associated challenges and uncertainties; the recognition that digital leaders need not be technical experts but should model their own digital development; the value of balancing criticality, strategic foresight, and enthusiasm for innovation; and the understanding that leadership in digital transformation is distributed across the university community.

The exploration of findings in this paper will offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of digital leadership, propose guiding principles to support effective digital leadership, and inform and equip leaders for future strategic initiatives across the diversity of the HE sector.