

LEADING FOR THE FUTURE: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS OF FUTURE-READY LEADERSHIP FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND AI INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI) are altering teaching, research, administration and institutional decision-making in higher education, but technological capability alone does not determine whether change is educationally valuable, equitable or trustworthy. This critical narrative review synthesises a purposively bounded corpus of 32 contemporary and foundational sources to examine which leadership capabilities and institutional mechanisms are required for responsible digital transformation. Rather than reporting empirical results, this study develops an interpretive framework linking six leadership competencies - digital literacy, strategic foresight, ethical judgement, emotional intelligence, adaptive change capacity and distributed collaboration - to governance, policy, professional development, resourcing and accountability mechanisms. The synthesis argues that hierarchical authority remains necessary for formal accountability but is insufficient when expertise is dispersed, and technological conditions change quickly. A contingent combination of transformational direction, distributed expertise and proportionate AI governance is therefore proposed. The framework further identifies institutional resources, mission, digital maturity, regulation and regional inequality as moderators, meaning that a single implementation model would reproduce rather than resolve inequity. Practical tables map competencies to interventions and AI risks to governance controls. This study contributes an institutionally actionable account of future-ready leadership while acknowledging the limits of a non-systematic, English-language conceptual corpus. It concludes that responsible innovation depends on leaders' capacity to connect technological judgement with human participation, ethical accountability and context-sensitive institutional design.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, Digital Transformation, Distributed Leadership, Higher Education, Leadership Development, Responsible AI.

Introduction

Digital transformation in higher education is not simply the substitution of digital tools for analogue processes. It changes how institutions organise teaching, student support, research, quality assurance and administrative decision-making. Post-pandemic adoption accelerated this transition and exposed substantial differences in institutional readiness, staff capability and access to infrastructure (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2023). Learning analytics, automated workflows and AI-assisted educational systems may improve responsiveness and resource use, but they also relocate judgement into technical and organisational systems that are not always visible to those affected (Bressane et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Murdan & Halkhoree, 2024).

This shift creates a leadership problem rather than a narrowly technical one. Leaders must decide which technologies serve the institutional mission, whose expertise informs adoption, which risks are acceptable and how benefits and burdens are distributed. Rapid innovation therefore increases the need for accountability rather than displacing it. It also challenges leadership arrangements built primarily for stability, because delayed or highly centralised decisions may be poorly matched to fast-changing conditions, while uncoordinated experimentation can create privacy, bias, procurement and quality risks (Adedoyin, 2025; Khairullah et al., 2025).

Leadership theory offers complementary resources for this problem. Transformational leadership, developed from Burns' (1978) distinction between transactional and transforming relations and extended by Bass (1985), explains how leaders articulate direction and mobilise commitment. Distributed leadership treats leadership practice as stretched across people, roles and situations rather than contained in one formal office (Spillane, 2006). Emotional intelligence foregrounds self-awareness, empathy and relationship management during uncertainty (Goleman, 1995). None of these perspectives is sufficient alone: digital transformation requires strategic direction, dispersed expertise, credible human engagement and formal accountability.

The study aimed to check the competencies that enable higher-education leaders to guide digital transformation and AI integration responsibly, and through which institutional mechanisms can those competencies become durable practice? It makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the theoretical foundations of future-ready leadership instead of treating it as a list of contemporary skills. Second, it distinguishes technological opportunity, ethical principle and governance mechanism, thereby reducing conceptual repetition. Third, it proposes a context-sensitive framework that maps leadership competencies to policies, governance structures, development activities and indicators. The framework is conceptual rather than predictive and is intended to support institutional diagnosis, adaptation and future empirical testing.

Method and Materials

Review Design and Purpose

This study is presented in the form of a critical narrative review and conceptual synthesis. The design is suitable since it is not only the pooled effect of one intervention that is under consideration in the question, but rather, the relationships among leadership theories, institutional mechanisms, and emerging AI risks. The narrative approach allows evidence from research in higher education, leadership theory, organisational research and applied technology to be interwoven and understood together. It does not, however, make claims of exhaustive coverage and empirical generalisation. The revised abstract and discussion, therefore, contain the words synthesis, argument and framework instead of the words results or findings.

Source Base, Selection and Boundaries

The 32-source corpus, listed in the reference section, is the material used for synthesis. The corpus was handcrafted to balance four concept clusters: (1) digital transformation and the change that is taking place in higher education; (2) hierarchical, transformational and distributed leadership; (3) AI-driven teaching, analytics and administration; and (4) ethics, equity, governance and leadership development. The modern divide is on literature from 2021-2026, as the use of generative and predictive AI in institutions is rapidly evolving. To provide a historical foundation for transformational leadership, distributed leadership and emotional intelligence, four roots were selected and published between 1978 and 2006, namely: Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Goleman, 1995; Spillane, 2006.

A search log and screening list were not available for a database search; therefore, this revision does not infer systematic retrieval. Rather, existing source base was re-screened with the inclusion of transparent concept strings of 'digital transformation' or 'artificial intelligence' with 'higher education', as well as 'distributed', 'transformational' or 'digital leadership' with 'higher education', and 'AI governance', 'algorithmic bias', 'ethical leadership', 'strategic foresight' or 'emotional intelligence' with 'higher education'. Sources were retained if they could relate directly to one or more analytical domains, explained an institutional mechanism or provided an important counterpoint on the work design, or on inequality or context. This collection comprises peer-reviewed articles, books and book chapters, conference papers, a doctoral study and a strategic foresight report. The sources utilised in Leadership 4.0, organisational learning and work design were only used in order to identify transferable capability questions; they were not used as proof of higher-education outcomes (Behie et al., 2023; Chowdhury, 2025; Parker & Grote, 2019). A source title audit identified content which did not support the claim made.

There are four boundaries on the review. It is concept-driven, English-language and not purely a database-driven resource; it emphasises institutional leadership and not just classroom-level pedagogy. No claim of PRISMA-style search yield or formal risk-of-bias score or meta-analysis is made. These boundaries are clearly stated in order to make clear to readers of the article which tasks the article serves (theory building) versus those served by a systematic evidence review.

Analytical Synthesis

The analysis was carried out using an iterative concept-mapping tool of concept mapping. The four clusters listed above were used to group the sources initially. The answers were then analysed based on

five questions: (1) what pressure is referred to, (2) which leadership quality is suggested, (3) which institutional lever enables this quality, (4) which risk or trade-off arises, and (5) which contextual condition alters the implementation. Recurring concepts were synthesised into six competencies, six institutional mechanisms, six responsible outcomes and six contextual moderators. Negative cases and tensions were retained - particularly the tension between speed and deliberation, central accountability and distributed expertise, automation and human judgement, and innovation and equity. The product is the framework and tables, which have been developed by the author and are not instruments of validation.

The Changing Landscape and the Leadership Problem

From Technology Adoption to Institutional Transformation

Higher education is currently going through concurrent technological, financial, regulatory and stakeholder pressures. Various other areas of teaching and service use are increasingly being mediated through digital platforms and technologies, such as the use of analytics for earlier identification of student need, and AI for content creation, feedback and admissions processing/administrative tasks (Bressane et al., 2022; Ngulube & Ncube, 2025). These changes can improve the scale and responsiveness of the development, but also alter the roles played by professionals, the recognition of decision rules and the data needed to run an institution. Digital transformation is then organisational redesign, rather than a procurement project (Ul Hassan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

These pressures have been exacerbated by the pandemic but have not generated a uniform transformation. While some institutions took the initiative in developing existing digital skills, others adopted emergency practices without investments in infrastructure and resources for staff, and without robust policies and structures for fostering digital transformation in the open search (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2023). Future readiness doesn't necessarily translate into the latest system, however. The ability to make informed, ethical and reversible decisions over time, to develop people, infrastructure and governance.

Institutional and Regional Variation

Obfuscating the significance of material differences in a generic account of 'higher education'. Research-intensive institutions may have specialised data, legal and technical support groups; smaller or rural institutions may require shared services or vendors. There are differences between the funding and accountability regime of public and private providers. Regulations, language, connectivity, disability access and the socioeconomic status of students also have an impact on what and who can be adopted. The need to develop local ecosystems and capacity, not without downsizing resource-heavy models, is highlighted in Cox (2025) Rural Leadership Study and Kayyali (2023) Small and medium universities. As well, Darmawaskita & McDaniel (2021) explain why social inequity is important for technology policy, not just access to technology.

Why Hierarchical Leadership Alone Is Insufficient

Hierarchy is still needed for statutory authority, budget, data protection, and institutional accountability. The issue is not hierarchy but the sole use of a vertical hierarchy in the case of the dispersion of expertise and uncertainty. It was found that a mix of centralised and local approval can limit local learning, or can

slow down the response; a purely decentralised approach to experimentation can lead to broken standards and expose students and staff to varying risk. Thus, future-ready leadership must have a dual architecture: clear executive accountability and distributed participation and experimentation bounded (Foss et al., 2023; Nassanga, 2024). The orientations depicted in Table 1 are not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as different orientations that may co-exist within a single person.

Table 1: Comparison of Traditional Hierarchical and Future-Ready Distributed-Transformational Leadership			
Dimension	Traditional Hierarchical Orientation	Distributed-Transformational Orientation	Critical Implication for Digital Change
Authority	Concentrated in formal senior roles and committees.	Leadership practice is shared across formal leaders, academic experts, professional staff and affected communities.	Executive accountability should remain explicit while expertise and voice are distributed.
Decision Logic	Precedent, control and sequential approval dominate.	Purpose, evidence, experimentation and cross-functional learning guide decisions.	Risk-tiered pathways can protect high-impact decisions without slowing low-risk learning.
Knowledge	Senior positions are treated as a proxy for sufficient knowledge.	Technical, pedagogical, ethical and experiential knowledge are recognised as dispersed.	AI decisions require interdisciplinary assessment and student/staff participation.
Change	Change is episodic and implemented after plans are finalised.	Change is iterative, interpreted locally and adjusted through feedback.	Pilots, monitoring and review are preferable to irreversible institution-wide adoption.
Culture	Compliance and error avoidance are prioritised.	Shared purpose, psychological safety and responsible experimentation are prioritised.	Learning from failure must be bounded by safeguards and accountability.
Primary Weakness	Slow adaptation, bottlenecks and limited ownership.	Diffused responsibility, uneven capability and potential fragmentation.	A hybrid model must specify decision rights, escalation routes and minimum standards.

Competencies for Future-Ready Higher-Education Leadership

Competencies are important only when they impact institutional practice. Future readiness as individual technological confidence would miss the relational, ethical and structural work of leadership. The synthesis pinpoints six interrelated competencies. They are not so much personality traits or universal checklists, but a process of developing them at the team and institutional levels and aligning them with decision rights, resources and accountability.

Digital Literacy and Strategic Foresight

Digital literacy is the ability to ask questions about the technology – how it works, what kinds of data it needs, what educational problem it solves and where it falls short. It provides enough knowledge to question vendors and experts, but it doesn't make the senior leaders into software engineers. In uncertain futures, digital literacy is strategically useful when used alongside foresight, specifically through conducting environmental scanning, building scenarios and making intentional investments in capacities that are relevant in the future, even in the face of uncertainty (Kohler, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Leaders need to be able to identify which experiments are reversible and which are infrastructure commitments that eventually lead to some kind of dependency.

Ethical Judgement and Emotional Intelligence

Ethical judgement transforms values such as fairness, privacy, academic integrity and human agency into decision-making criteria. The main reasons for the importance of values-based leadership in the absence of rules that are commensurate with the technological capability are related to the following (Miklian & Katsos, 2024; Rajput, 2026): Another aspect of ethical competence is preparedness to end or redesign an otherwise successful system where the cost is disproportionately borne by less powerful groups. This judgement is supported by emotional intelligence, which helps leaders identify feelings of fear, professional identity threats and conflicting relationships when change is happening. Empathy is not an alternative to tough choices – it enhances the quality and authenticity with which choices are explored, communicated and reviewed (Goleman, 1995; Alenezi, 2024).

Adaptive Change Capacity and Distributed Collaboration

Adaptive change capacity is the ability to learn in the process of acting. Leaders provide limited areas for innovation and allow time for learning from or pivoting. Distributed collaboration makes sure that academic, technical, administrative and student knowledge is not consulted after the problem is resolved, but is consulted at the beginning of the problem. Transformational direction provides purpose, distributed leadership provides situated expertise, and formal governance provides accountability (Bass, 1985; Spillane, 2006; Ivanova, 2023). Table 2 provides examples of interventions and indicators that reflect those competencies.

Table 2: Leadership Competencies Mapped to Institutional Interventions			
Core Competency	Leadership Practice	Institutional Intervention	Risk Addressed and Illustrative Indicator
Digital Literacy	Interrogates capability, data requirements, vendor claims and limitations.	Role-specific AI literacy; procurement challenge panels; technology-use inventory.	Reduces uninformed adoption. Indicator: proportion of relevant leaders completing assessed, role-specific development.
Strategic Foresight	Scans technological and regulatory change; distinguishes reversible and path-dependent choices.	Scenario planning; staged investment; annual capability and dependency review.	Reduces lock-in and reactive spending. Indicator: major investments linked to documented scenarios and exit criteria.
Ethical Judgement	Applies fairness, privacy, agency and proportionality to decisions.	AI impact assessment; ethics review; appeal and remedy procedures.	Reduces bias and rights harm. Indicator: high-impact systems assessed before approval and re-assessed after change.
Emotional Intelligence	Surfaces concerns, manages conflict and communicates uncertainty honestly.	Structured consultation; change-support mechanisms; psychologically safe feedback routes.	Reduces disengagement and hidden resistance. Indicator: staff/student trust and confidence measures.
Adaptive Change Capacity	Runs bounded experiments, learns from failure and revises plans.	Time-limited pilots; success and stop criteria; post-pilot review.	Reduces uncontrolled scaling. Indicator: pilots with documented learning, incidents and scale/stop decisions.
Distributed Collaboration	Connects executive authority with pedagogical, technical, professional and lived expertise.	Interdisciplinary governance board; faculty/student representation; communities of practice.	Reduces narrow and unrepresentative decisions. Indicator: representation, attendance and published decision rationales.
Source: Author-developed synthesis based on Spillane (2006), Goleman (1995), Kohler (2021), Parker & Grote (2019), Alenezi (2024), Wang et al. (2024) and Khairullah et al. (2025).			

AI Integration, Governance and Risk Mitigation

Educational and Organisational Opportunities

AI can be a valuable aid in personalised learning pathways, early detection of academic risk, assessment processes, student support, and administrative effectiveness (Bressane et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2022; Murdan & Halkhoree, 2024). Learning analytics can assist institutions to uncover patterns that might not be apparent, and the use of student-AI collaboration can augment learning where the teachers explicitly create roles for the AI system and the learner (Kim et al., 2022; Ngulube & Ncube, 2025). These are only potential advantages, not guaranteed advantages. The value of the learning is built on the quality of the data, the ability of staff, the available design and the retention of human judgement.

Distinct Risks and Ethical Tensions

The primary hazard risks are related but are analytically separable. The issues of privacy relate to lawful and proportionate data collection, access and retention. Algorithmic bias applies to the difference in error or treatment based on groups. Opacity deals with whether or not affected people can grasp or object to decisions. One of the issues with automation bias is over-reliance on system output. Academic Integrity involves truthfulness and the intent behind learning and testing. Access is an issue when infrastructure, disability, language or cost prevents a particular student from accessing. These categories need to be separated to avoid a "generic ethics" discussion replacing the operational controls (Darmawaskita & McDaniel, 2021; Parker & Grote, 2019; Waters, 2024).

A Concrete Governance Architecture

Commitment to responsible action demands a structure of governance that is in place, rather than discretionary approval from the various offices. There should be accountability by a governing body/executive sponsor and an interdisciplinary AI governance board with academic leadership, learning and teaching skills, information technology, cyber security, data protection, legal/compliance, ethics, accessibility, staff and student representation. The board should keep an AI usage register, include impact classification, mandate, an AI impact assessment for consequential applications, authorise pilots, establish human oversight, appeal, and monitor reports (Khairullah et al., 2025).

Governance should be commensurate. Low-risk tools may proceed with a minimal amount of privacy, security and accessibility review. Stronger evidence, independent challenge, human review and remedy should be applied to systems that impact admissions, progression, grading, financial aid, and staff evaluation and/or sensitive student support. Sandboxes that are limited in time or are regulated or institutional can allow innovation and not normalise untested systems. Ownership of data, changes to models, access to audits, performance reports, accessibility, subcontractors, and the terms under which they are released. This is balanced, taking a speedy approach while ensuring the most impactful controls are in the areas where education and rights are most affected.

Table 3: AI Risks and Proportionate Institutional Governance Controls

Risk domain	Required Control	Responsible Actors	Evidence and Review Question
Privacy and Security	Data minimisation, lawful-basis review, security testing, retention limits and contractual restrictions.	Data protection, cybersecurity, procurement and system owner.	What data are necessary, who can access them and when are they deleted?
Bias and Inequity	Disaggregated performance testing, accessibility review and impact assessment before and after deployment.	AI governance board, equality/accessibility specialists and affected communities.	Do error rates, access or consequences differ across relevant groups?
Opacity and Contestability	Plain-language notice, decision documentation, explanation, appeal and remedy.	System owner, academic governance, legal/compliance and student services.	Can an affected person understand, challenge and obtain review of a consequential decision?
Automation Bias	Specified human authority, training, override logging and periodic review of reliance.	Professional decision-makers, line managers and internal audit.	Is human review meaningful, competent and able to change the outcome?
Educational Validity	Pedagogical evaluation, assessment redesign and evidence of benefit before scaling.	Academic boards, programme leaders, educators and students.	Does the system strengthen the intended learning process rather than merely increase throughput?
Vendor Dependence	Due diligence, audit rights, change notification, interoperability and exit planning.	Procurement, IT architecture, legal counsel and executive sponsor.	Can the institution detect material change and leave without unacceptable data or service loss?

Integrated Framework and Institutional Application

The Future-Ready Leadership Framework

Figure 1 is the integration of separate threads of the paper. Leadership abilities are regarded as capacities that enable rather than outcomes. They only have an impact in responsible outcomes through institutional mechanisms like governing, policy, professional learning, involvement, resources, and monitoring. All relationships are influenced by contextual conditions. This way, the framework does not suggest that structural under-resourcing or weak governance/exclusion can be resolved by the individual who is emotionally intelligent or digitally literate. It also provides clarification that technology does not equal outcome—a responsible educational value, an equitable outcome, support for trust and resilience.

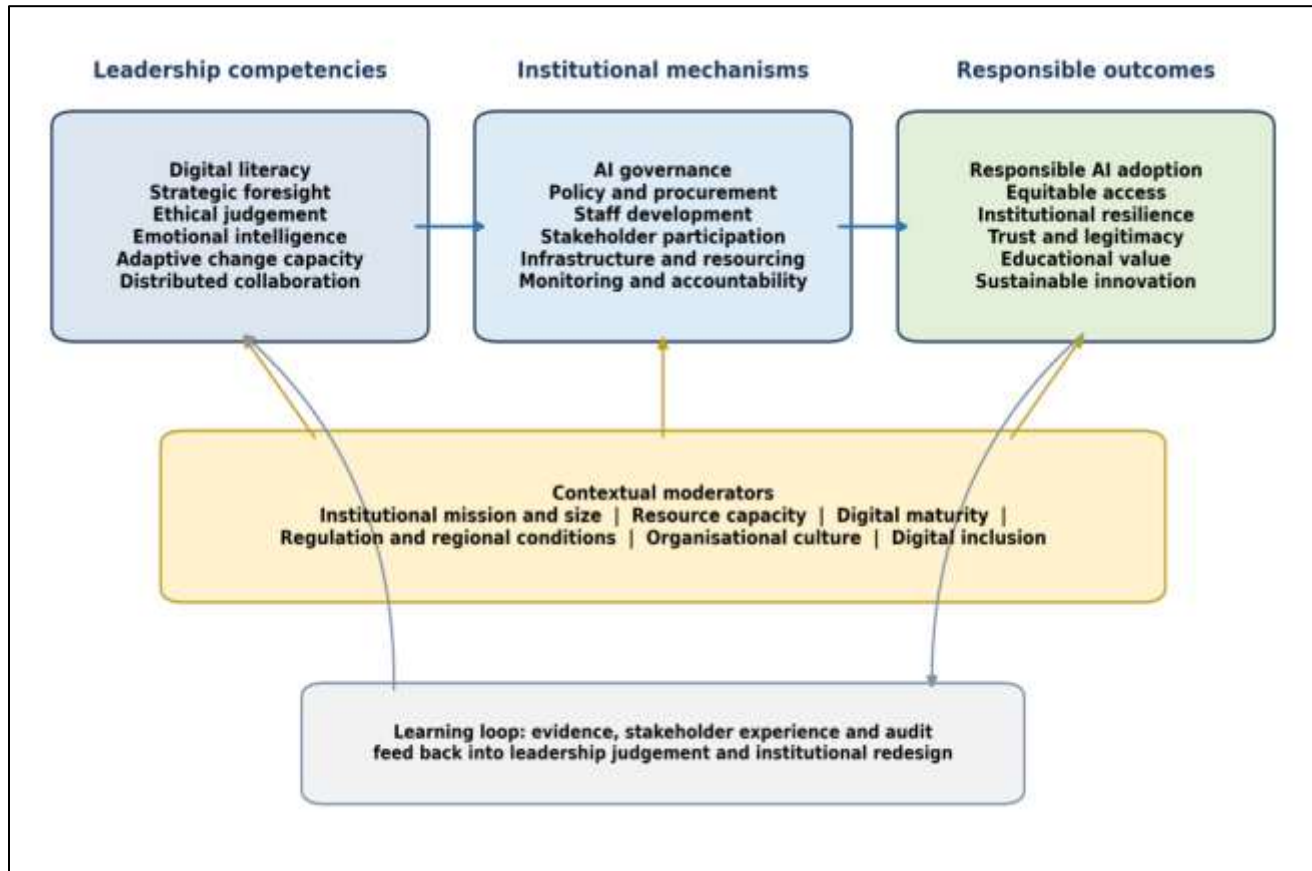


Figure 1: Integrated Framework for Future-Ready Leadership in Digitally Transforming Higher Education

From Framework to Governance Practice

The governance process is not exclusive to a single technology choice, but is instead a rolling governance cycle that brings the framework operationally into effect. The inventory of uses and accountable owners is followed by a risk classification, impact assessment, approval and piloting, monitoring and review or retirement of uses and owners, as shown in Figure 2. The need for human oversight, participation, accountability and remedy is still at the core. The cycle is a way for institutions to innovate and still offer a way to challenge, correct and withdraw. It also gives organisational memory – evidence of incidents, users and audits feed into subsequent leadership judgement.

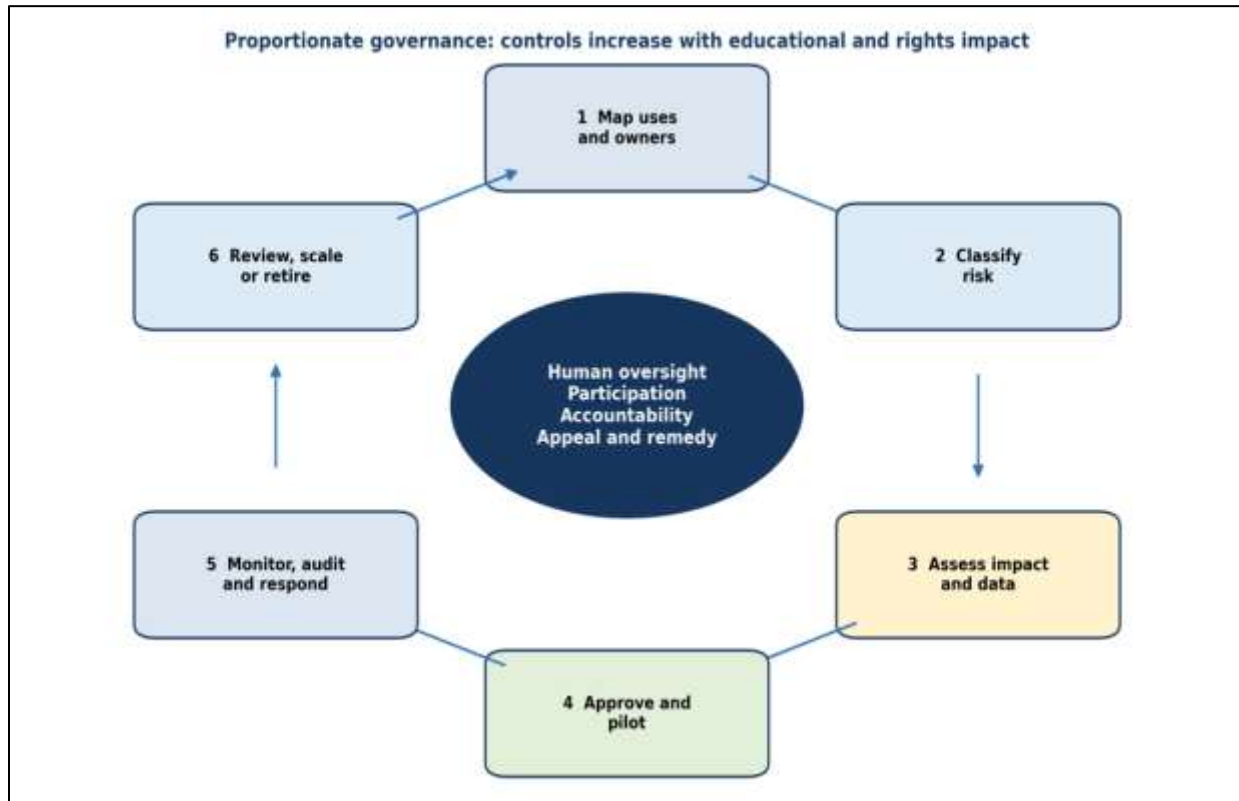


Figure 2: A Proportionate Institutional AI-Governance Cycle

Culture, Policy and Leadership Development

Institutional culture changes when leaders align messages, incentives and routines. If workload models don't allow time to learn, promotion criteria don't consider digital educational leadership or staff are warned against reporting issues, then calls for innovation are hardly credible, as they have no chance of being taken up. Psychological safety is essential in responsible experimentation, which also must include clear limits: it's OK to fail, but not OK to fail on a student's rights or critical decisions (Rhaiem & Amara, 2021; Lanford & Tierney, 2022). Policy review needs therefore to link academic integrity, assessment, data, procurement, accessibility, staff development and quality assurance, and should not be the sole responsibility of the technology office.

Leadership development should follow the framework. It is not enough to do short technical demonstrations. Programmes should include applied AI literacy, ethical case analysis, scenario planning, cross-functional projects, coaching and structured reflection. The participant(s) should practice challenging vendor claims, expressing uncertainty, responding to a simulated incident and creating a reasonable pilot plan. Multi-rater feedback and coaching have proved to be effective in augmenting interpersonal aspects of awareness, yet development is only meaningful if linked to actual authority, time and institutional projects in order to impact practice (Das & Rajini, 2023).

Context-Sensitive Pathways

Different institutional forms are needed for the same principles. Resource-rich universities can keep their own model-audit capacity, while smaller universities can pool their resources by forming consortia. Rural

institutions might want to focus on more basic elements such as connectivity, staff capacity, and shared governance over the system before advanced analytics. This is particularly important for institutions serving students with limited devices, bandwidth or digital confidence – if supporting students means inclusion for them, support infrastructure mustn't be an add-on, but an integral part of the curriculum. Table 4 shows 'proportionate pathways' and does not provide a ranking of institution types.

Table 4. Context-Sensitive Implementation of the Framework

Institutional Context	Immediate Leadership Priority	Proportionate Implementation	Equity Safeguard
Research-Intensive / Digitally Mature	Coordinate multiple AI initiatives and prevent fragmented risk ownership.	Institution-wide register, specialist assurance, interoperable standards and independent challenge for high-impact systems.	Include student, accessibility and precarious-staff perspectives in portfolio decisions.
Teaching-Focused / Medium Resource	Prioritise educational value and staff capacity over tool volume.	Small number of governed pilots, shared evaluation templates and role-specific professional development.	Measure participation and outcomes across programmes and student groups before scaling.
Small, Rural or Under-Resourced	Build foundational capacity and reduce vendor dependence.	Consortium governance, pooled legal/technical expertise, phased procurement and shared training.	Assess connectivity, devices, language and disability access before AI-dependent service design.
Highly Regulated Professional Programmes	Protect validity, accountability and professional standards.	Discipline-specific approval, documented human judgement and conservative use in consequential assessment.	Provide transparent appeal and alternative participation routes.
High Digital-Divide Context	Prevent digital transformation from reallocating cost and risk to students.	Low-bandwidth design, device/support provision, non-digital alternatives and community consultation.	Monitor exclusion, additional student expenditure and differential withdrawal or failure.
Source: Author-developed application based on Cox (2025), Darmawaskita & McDaniel (2021), Kayyali (2023), Deroncele-Acosta et al. (2023) and Ul Hassan et al. (2025).			

Discussion

An Integrated and Contingent Account of Future-Ready Leadership

The synthesis addresses three common issues in debates about what it means to be a digital leader. First, it is against technological determinism. AI doesn't eradicate a style of leadership; it affects the makeup of knowledge, velocity, and risk that institutions need to operate at. Secondly, it does not accept a mere dichotomy of hierarchy versus distribution. Distributed expertise is a key to problem definition and scrutiny and local learning, with formal authority needed for accountability. Transformational leadership provides direction and motivation, and it can be enticing without governance, though. Third, it distinguishes competence from consequences: Digital literacy or ethical sensitivity is worthless if it isn't backed up by policies, resources, review processes and consequences.

These relationships can be articulated in a pragmatic manner: competence influences the way leaders act, which in turn triggers an institutional process; an institutional process determines a certain risk, or it allows for certain outcomes, which then leads to alterations of what is possible due to the context. For instance, the ethical decision to demand an impact assessment is made, but the value of the assessment is related to the adequate information, skills, engagement and power to alter or abort a project. The sequence is more helpful than a competency list as it shows where implementation might go wrong.

The framework also alters the way in which success is judged. Adoption levels or volumes of automated transactions are not a good indicator. Institutions should review the educational validity, differential access and error, trust of staff and students, quality of human review, incident response, ability to exit vendor agreements, and learning changes policy. Efficiency is still relevant but needs to be considered alongside mission, rights and long-term ability.

Limitations

This study has important limitations. The source base is not systematic and does not include all relevant regional, indigenous or non-English scholarship, but is purposive and includes literature published since 2021 and is English language. There are a number of contemporary sources that are conceptual or exist in other related fields, which restrict causal effectiveness claims in higher education. Specific examples may become dated quickly as AI capability and regulation are evolving faster than traditional publication cycles. Lastly, the framework has not been empirically tested, and categories can have varying interactions in different governance systems, disciplines and institutional missions. These constraints limit scope for generalisation, but they also describe the scope of the framework's usage as a diagnostic proposition and a research question.

Future Research Directions

Future research should test the framework through comparative, longitudinal and mixed-method designs. Comparative studies of the implementation of the same governance principle in differently resourced institutions and regions might be included. Leadership development research could be conducted and evaluated for whether it leads to better decision-making, increased staff trust, increased incident reporting and equitable outcomes, not just a sense of confidence. Research should also develop and validate indicators for meaningful human oversight, contestability and responsible scaling. Senior-leader perspectives are not likely to capture implementation pressures, and this is especially true for student and professional staff and contingent faculty perspectives. Lastly, the evaluation should explore the time at which consortium or shared-service governance allows under-resourced institutions to achieve access to expertise while reducing reliance on vendors.

Conclusion

This study highlights that being a leader in the future is not about seeing the potential in AI just as much as it's not about resisting hierarchy entirely. It is the ability to bind together technological judgement, strategic direction, distributed knowledge, ethical responsibility and a human element in strong, lasting institutional arrangements. What this study makes especially notable is the integration of a six-competency framework into a context-sensitive approach that connects six competencies with governance, policy, development, resourcing and monitoring and includes inequality and institutional capacity as conditions, rather than as peripheral issues. The key takeaway is that people development and people governance must happen simultaneously within institutions. Leading without decision rights, procurement, workload, and accountability changes will see limited change; implementing governance without digital and relational competence will see procedural compliance without informed judgement. Proportionate AI governance is a concept that balances the preservation of rights and educational purpose with the continued exploration of AI's potential. The framework now needs to be empirically tested, especially in the context of under-resourced and diverse regional contexts. Until then, the key

message it has is that digital transformation is not just about the technology, but about getting the purpose, risks, responsibilities and learning processes of digital transformation into the open and open for discussion.

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