Global Trends Towards Flexible, Hybrid Working and its Impact for Digital Leadership in Higher Education

A report by Dr Maren Deepwell. Commissioned by the N-TUTORR National Digital Leadership Network

National Digital Leadership Network

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Author biography

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Abstract

This strategic report will focus on the global trend towards flexible, hybrid working and its impact for Digital Leadership in Higher Education in Ireland and beyond. We examine the wider implications of hybrid learning and working for Higher Education and situate this current globalised trend in its historical context. We also explore best practice examples drawn from industry and education sectors and highlight the role of effective Digital Leadership in meeting the challenges of changing needs of (lifelong) learner populations in a world impacted by environmental and technological factors and draw together strategic recommendations for leaders in Higher Education seeking to support student success from Higher Education into a fast moving, competitive job market that is under threat from automation and AI.

Introduction to the National Digital Leadership Network Report Series

The National Digital Leadership Network (NDLN) is a collaborative initiative designed to support digital transformation across Ireland's Technological Higher Education sector. Established under the N-TUTORR programme with funding provided through the EU's NextGenerationEU initiative, the network was officially launched in November 2024 to provide a national platform for digital leadership, while also facilitating associated knowledge exchange and strategic collaboration. While the N-TUTORR programme has now concluded, our network continues its work under the guidance of a steering board composed of sector leaders and external experts.

Digital leadership in higher education extends far beyond technical expertise or the adoption of certain tools and platforms: it's about vision, strategy, and culture change. Effective digital leaders ensure that digital strategies and developments align with institutional and national priorities, not only enhancing teaching, learning, research, and administration functions but also upholding academic values, promoting equity, and driving business innovation. In this context, the NDLN fosters collaboration among higher education leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, providing opportunities to share insights, explore emerging challenges, and develop shared solutions.

As part of its work, the NDLN has commissioned a series of horizon-scanning reports authored by leading national and international scholars and practitioners. These reports explore key trends at the intersection of digital innovation, traditional leadership and strategic planning, providing actionable insights to support higher education institutions in aligning these trends and related opportunities with institutional and national priorities. Covering topics such as the evolving role of generative AI in academia, data-driven decision-making, academic integrity, new models of learning and teaching and new ways to plan for financial sustainability, this report series offers timely advice and direction for higher education leaders navigating the interrelated complexities of the digital and post-digital age.

We extend our gratitude to the N-TUTORR programme for its financial support, and to N-TUTORR Co-ordinator Dr Sharon Flynn for her direction and continued support of the network. Thank you also to members of our national steering board and to our external contributors, in particular Professor Lawrie Phipps.

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Guerra– whose work has been vital to the preparation and publication of these reports. We are also very grateful to Dr Catherine Cronin, our chief editor, and, of course, to all our authors whose insights, expertise, and dedication form the heart and foundation of this series.

We invite you to engage with these reports and join us in shaping the future of digital leadership in higher education.

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Executive Summary

Hybrid working is here to stay. As the legal rights of those working in higher education to request flexible and remote working evolve in Ireland and beyond, both policy and practice have shifted. This shift to hybrid working at scale has accelerated over the past five years and constitutes a long-term change that leaders must act on.

In higher education, our understanding of who the "typical" student might once have been has evolved to a more diverse, inclusive definition of what it means to be a learner.[1] Correspondingly, blended learning and teaching has grown into a richer, more diverse student experience. Blended learning offers many advantages that the current student population has come to rely on. There are many parallels that can be drawn between blended learning and hybrid working, and this report will highlight key issues for institutions and their leaders in doing just that. In the same way in which our understanding of students has evolved, so must the vision for higher education institutions (HEIs) and their staff develop in the context of hybrid working.

Sector leaders often look to industry to find agile, innovative ways to meet change. Yet this report shows how by leveraging expertise in blended learning design and delivery – and by harnessing those insights in order to address workforce engagement, retention, and performance – digital leaders in education could show their counterparts in industry the way towards a more sustainable and equitable future for hybrid working. The report's recommendations offer practical steps forward as institutions navigate the global trends towards hybrid working and build the digital capabilities required for both students and staff.

[1]See Bryant (2024), also in the National Digital Leadership Network report series, for further exploration of changing student demographics.

Introduction

This strategic report explores how global trends towards flexible, hybrid working impact digital leadership in higher education. Using best practice examples, the report:

- Examines the wider implications of hybrid working and blended learning for higher education and situates this current globalised trend in its historical context;
- Explores best practice examples drawn from industry and education sectors and highlights the role of effective digital leadership in meeting the challenges posed by the changing needs of (lifelong) learner populations in a world impacted by environmental and technological factors; and
- Draws together strategic recommendations for readers in higher education seeking to support student success in transitioning from higher education into a fast-moving, competitive job market that is under threat from automation and artificial intelligence (AI).

From promoting equity-based approaches to working towards global sustainability goals, this report looks at significant aspects of how hybrid working and blended learning are evolving, and how this changes the demands placed on digital leadership on a global scale. Using practical examples from industry and education, the report will make practical recommendations for senior leaders seeking to enhance digital leadership through policy and practice within their institution.

In recent years, we have seen considerable acceleration of the adoption of blended learning worldwide (Carroll et al., 2024, p. 2). In parallel to these changes in higher education, employers have witnessed an evolution of flexible and hybrid working practices. We are seeing a shift in both learning and working that presents challenges and opportunities for digital leaders.

This shift is particularly relevant in the context of changing demographics in a growing student population, whose needs are changing in a fast-moving, competitive job market under threat from automation and AI. Effective digital leadership in education must address these factors of student success as they prepare to (re-)enter the workforce.

Opposing the shift to more blended learning and hybrid working are persistent challenges: in education, these include the need for more time management skills, negative attitudes from staff, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of technology and infrastructure, and interpersonal issues such as isolation. In the workplace, meanwhile,

there are some indicators that large employers are heralding the return to the office (Howard, 2023), and a recent survey stated that "87% of CEOs globally [think] it's likely or very likely that employees who make an effort to come into the office will be rewarded with favourable assignments, raises or promotions" (Holt, 2023).

So while hybrid working is overwhelmingly popular with employees, similar to how students value the flexibility of blended learning models, challenges persist for employees, leaders, and institutions that pose a risk of "going back". Going back not only in the sense of returning to the office, but also negating the potential gains made since 2020 instead of investing in the digital leadership and vision needed to succeed.

The affordances technology provides are great, and both in education and in the workplace a lack of knowledge and digital leadership has a negative impact on managers' ability to lead their teams effectively. It can also make it more challenging for leaders managing remote teams from a well-being and performance perspective (CIPD, 2023).

However, developing digital leadership in this context can prove particularly difficult, as hybrid working at scale is a relatively recent innovation in most sectors, and strategic training for managers and leaders is only slowly evolving.

A Note on The Terminology Used: Blended Learning and Hybrid Working

In order to practise effective digital strategy and leadership, it is important to be clear about the terms used to describe how we learn and work, as they can vary greatly between institutions, especially when it comes to blended learning and hybrid working.

Commonly, the terms "hybrid" and "blended" learning are used interchangeably, to refer to combining onsite and online learning by blending the strengths of one modality and neutralising the weaknesses of the other to provide flexibility to learners, instructors, and educational institutions. The flexibility can be afforded to time, space,

This report will use the term "blended learning" as encompassing this definition alongside flipped, à la carte, and HyFlex delivery models.

As with terms used in higher education, the language used to describe workplace practices has also evolved, and there are a number of terms that are commonly used to describe working away from an office, including "hybrid working", "home working", "distributed working", "virtual working", and "remote working". Working from home or home working is often part of hybrid working, a term now used to describe employers allowing staff to work away from the office or campus for some days each week.

It's important to distinguish between hybrid working and flexible working: in the

UK, for example, "flexible working doesn't just mean a combination of working from home and in the office – it can mean employees making use of job-sharing, flexitime, and working compressed, annualised, or staggered hours" (UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and Hollinrake, 2022). In Ireland, meanwhile, the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 gives employees who are parents and carers the statutory right to request flexible working, and the statutory right to request remote working for all employees.

The term "remote working" can encompass home working, but employees may also work from other locations that are remote from their usual workplace, such as working remotely on a construction site. It implies that there is a central hub, such as an office, from which remote workers are removed. Distributed working, meanwhile, refers to the way a group of employees work together, which may be working from a number of locations – including the employees' homes, an office, or elsewhere – on a permanent basis. A university with a number of different campuses may, for example, work like a distributed organisation even if a lot of interactions happen in person.

This report will use the term "hybrid working", encompassing both remote and flexible working, as an overarching term referring to evolving workplace practices.

Global Trends Towards Hybrid Working

During the Covid-19 pandemic, countries around the world moved learning online (Singh et al., 2021). What became commonly known as the "great online pivot" enabled students to continue their learning during this worldwide emergency, during the months of lockdown and the gradual return to in-person teaching. At the same time as learning pivoted online, a parallel shift was seen in the workplace for an increasing proportion of the population. Globally, up to 88% of organisations "encouraged or required employees to work from home" (Gartner, 2020) during 2020.

Many countries, including Ireland, have since formalised the shift to hybrid working through their legislative frameworks. In Europe, international institutions such as the European Commission (2022) have formalised hybrid working at scale, as is evident from its formal policy shift on working time and hybrid working. This decision has introduced long-term hybrid working for its staff, setting an example of "promoting a modern, digital and flexible working environment, to protect staff's health and wellbeing, enhance efficiency and improve work-life balance" as well as "contribute to reducing CO2 emissions arising from staff commuting and the resulting congestion" (European Commission, 2022).

In the US context, a widely cited survey conducted by Gartner predicted in 2023 that "by [the end of] 2023, 51% of all knowledge workers worldwide are expected to be working hybrid or remotely, up from 27% of knowledge workers in 2019" and further that

> the U.S. number of fully and remote and hybrid knowledge workers will account for 71% of the U.S. workforce in 2023. In the UK, fully remote and hybrid knowledge workers will represent 67% of its workforce in 2023. (Gartner, 2023)

Although no updated figures from Gartner are publicly available at the time of writing, a more recent US survey from early 2024 suggests that "nine in ten employers of knowledge workers offer hybrid working" (Franklin, 2024). Meanwhile, a recent analysis (ESOFT Lifelong Learning, 2024) of Irish employer data shows that:

> Ireland is leading in remote work when we compare it to other countries. By January 2023, 16% of job ads in Ireland were for hybrid/remote work. ... This fast move to remote work in Ireland helps employees work flexibly. It also helps keep talent in rural areas, stopping the brain drain. With over 300 co-working spaces and digital skill training, Ireland is making remote work a key part of its future.

Drawing parallels between learning and working can offer insights for digital leaders: although the rapid move to online learning and teaching in itself was a remarkable achievement, what many experienced was an emergency response version of online learning, not the carefully designed curriculum that best practice in blended learning demonstrates. Similarly, for many staff, working remotely in a time of crisis functioned as an introduction to home working at scale. Just as universities and schools received little notice before pivoting online, employers had to send staff home from one day to the next with no support or preparation. The result, for many, was the equivalent of online learning during the crisis, a kind of emergency home working.

We are now seeing the next step in the evolution from crisis provision to a more fully realised vision for blended learning and hybrid working. As Jessop (2020) suggested even at the start of the pandemic, it is important to shift mindsets with regard to

> the narrative about online education [away] from a deficit one. We need to find ways to ensure that we see some advantages to this different mode of education and garner the benefits of its particular world of possibilities. It won't be easy; it won't be cheap; but our online education won't be a paltry imitation of old and tired genres like the lecture.

With a focus on recovery and resilience in the aftermath of the pandemic, higher education in Ireland and elsewhere has certainly realised at least some of this vision for

the future of the blended classroom. The lessons learnt along the way of greeting a richer, more flexible, and more inclusive student experience should likewise provide inspiration for creating the future of the hybrid workplace, and effective digital leadership must be at the heart of this endeavour.

Calls for a return to the way things were risk not only ignoring the changing needs of current student and employee demographics, which include a demand for greater flexibility and work–life balance, but also missing out on the opportunity to lead the way in shaping our next normal.

Digital Capabilities in the Hybrid Workplace

At every level, from institutional to individual, the shift to blended learning and hybrid working at scale has highlighted the importance of digital literacy and other digital skills. As is explored in more depth later in this report, digital capabilities in the hybrid workplace encompass a broad range of applications, from personal digital productivity to critical digital and data literacy, and to managing personal data and privacy.

Alongside these elements, the ability to manage digital well-being has become more important. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that, although the greater flexibility offered by hybrid models can have a positive impact on well-being and work–life balance, there is also potential for negative impact caused by being constantly connected and online, from Zoom fatigue (Masjutin et al., 2024) to digital overwhelm. The full impact of long-term hybrid or remote working at scale is not well understood, as many current studies focus on data collected from pioneering remote teams in the tech industry and more research is needed.

Beyond our individual physical and mental well-being, what has already been established is that employers need to develop a greater awareness of how new ways of working may increase inequality. Studies focused on socio-economic inequalities observed during the pandemic, for instance (such as Nwosu et al., 2022), provide clear reference points, and a horizon-scanning report published by the UK Parliament (2021) highlights that

> The impact on health and well-being of the increase of technologies in the workplace and long-term working from home is not yet known and could have potential effects on healthcare systems. Positive benefits from increased flexible working will not be equally distributed throughout the population and could increase economic and social inequalities.

Some workers may now have more flexibility working from home, but the pressures of competing demands, including family and care responsibilities, remain constant. Other

risks include the increased digital surveillance of employees and other privacy concerns connected to home working. This blurring of boundaries between personal, private, and work or study has led to the need to formally articulate how the relationship between institutions and their digitally connected, hybrid workforce/student population is changing. In recent years, countries including France (2016), Italy (2017), Spain (2018), and Portugal (2021) have introduced policies giving employees the right to disconnect (Henshall, 2021), and Ireland introduced a similar bill in 2021, known as the Code of Practice on Right to Disconnect (Department of Trade, Enterprise and Employment, 2021).

In this wider context, work in higher education to develop individual digital capabilities – enabling individuals to live, learn, and work in a digital society – takes on a greater significance. Developing digital capabilities and digital leadership is supported by Ireland's Higher Education Digital Capability (HEDC) Framework (HolonIQ, 2020) and in the UK by Jisc's Digital Capabilities Framework (Jisc, 2024).

Considering the Irish context, the European Union's (EU) State of the Digital Decade report for Ireland (European Commission, 2024), shows that Ireland has "achieved 72.9% basic digital skills coverage, compared to the EU average of 55.6%. This puts Ireland at 91.1% of the overall target for the EU 2030 goal, which aims to have 80% of the EU population possess at least basic digital skills".

Higher Education Digital Capability Framework

An open-source capability framework for higher education. 4 dimensions, 16 domains and 70+ capabilities.

Framework All | Dimensions | Domains | Capabilities **Sort** Original | Name | Number

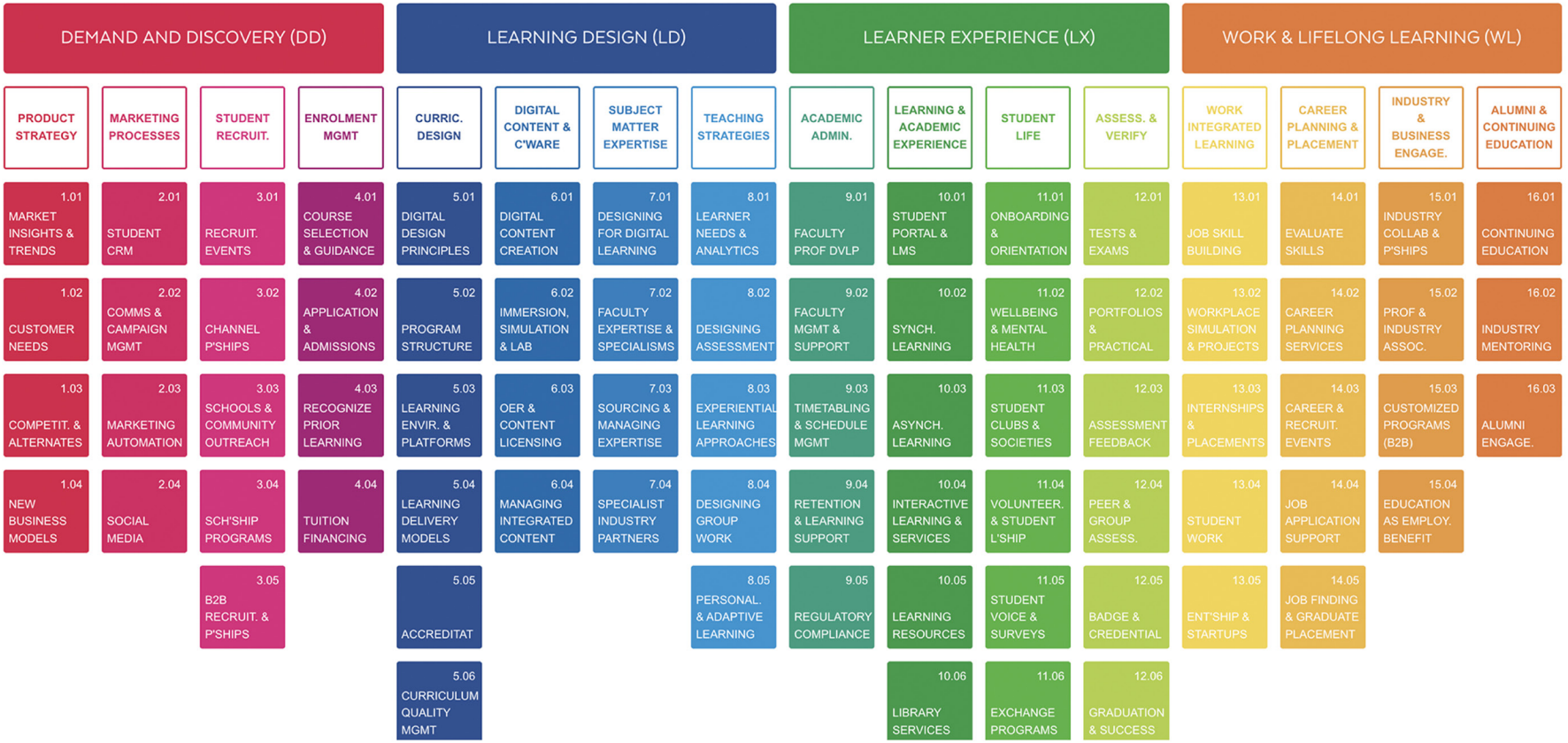

Figure 1: Higher Education Digital Capability (HEDC) Framework (HolonIQ, 2020)

The more than seventy digital capabilities included in the HEDC Framework shown in Figure 1 provide the foundation for developing both a vision and practical approaches for digital leaders. Covering a range of dimensions, from demand and discovery to work and lifelong learning, this framework is relevant not only in higher education but can in many aspects be translated to the hybrid workplace as well. In order to navigate the emerging challenges emerging from blended learning and hybrid working at scale effectively, leaders need to apply these digital capabilities to bring together the valuable expertise provided by the experience of the pandemic years with an openness to a new vision for what's ahead, the new paradigm of hybrid and blended working.

Digital Leadership and Hybrid Working in Higher Education in Ireland

Hybrid working is becoming enshrined in employment law and practice in Ireland, in the UK, and across Europe, despite occasional headlines and examples to the contrary (Bensinger, 2024; Howard, 2023; Royle, 2023). In Ireland, for instance, the legal framework of remote and flexible working practice is set out in the *Code of Practice for Employers and Employees: Right to Request Flexible Working and Right to Request Remote Working*, published by the Workplace Relations Commission (2024). The Code, intended to "assist employees and employers to navigate the complexities of requests for flexible and remote working arrangements" (p. 1), highlights several far-reaching issues particularly relevant for higher education institutions:

> [There] has been an increased focus on fostering participation in the labour force through flexible working solutions ... [in relation to] sustainability and positive environmental impacts, to increasing participation amongst women, older people and people with disabilities and all those with caring responsibilities ... as well as increas[ing] the participation of women in the labour market and the shared take-up of family-related leave and flexible working. This development in tandem with the advent of Covid 19 and the rapid transition to remote working has transformed the way many of us work.
>
> The knock-on effects of flexible and remote working arrangements can be far reaching. Parents and carers can benefit from better work-life balance which can improve retention of experienced staff. Companies can benefit from a wider talent pool and employees have the opportunity to fit other commitments and activities around work. This can all lead to greater job satisfaction and better staff morale.

It is also important to acknowledge that the statutory changes merely reflect a longer-term shift to hybrid and flexible working practices rather than prompting them.

The balance of power relations in the workplace has shifted in the wake of widespread hybrid working.

Interestingly, the Code also acknowledges that flexible and remote working can "pose challenges, particularly in terms of collaboration, integration, team management and communication" (Workplace Relations Commission, 2024). It is precisely these challenges that digital leadership needs to address as higher education as a sector navigates the reality of its newly hybrid institutions at scale.

Although more research is needed to fully understand the long-term impact of hybrid working in higher education in Ireland, trends are emerging. For example, a recent survey of 650 workers across Irish organisations (Microsoft, 2024) indicates that employers are working harder to recruit and retain the best talent by offering more flexibility to knowledge workers. Similarly, research carried out jointly by Dublin City University and the University of Galway, published in the *Harvard Business Review* (Tippmann et al., 2021b) in the article 'Which Hybrid Work Model Is Best for Your Business?', shares insights into the bigger picture:

> Accelerated adoption of remote working provides leaders with an opportunity to reevaluate how to model their organisation. Leaders must balance the need for employees to collaborate for creativity against the ability of virtual organisations to access talent across the globe. Both international and Irish businesses have an opportunity to take advantage of these new hybrid models. The future of your organisation may be determined by your decision.

So while some trends and insights are apparent as institutions across the sector put in place high-level policies for hybrid working, the medium- to long-term impact of moving to more remote and flexible working at scale and their implications of digital leadership are only just beginning to emerge.

For example, digital capabilities, such as those included in the HEDC Framework, often focus on personal digital productivity and digital literacy. By developing these capabilities, students and staff aim to develop their use and understanding of technology in order to fully engage with their professional and social lives. Particularly in higher education, the focus is usually on developing these capabilities in relation to learning, teaching, and assessment, and the term "digital leadership" refers to using technology effectively in order to achieve institutional objectives and guide institutional strategy and vision for the use of digital technology for research, teaching, or organisational processes.

If, however, the aim of digital leadership is true digital transformation to empower students and staff across the digital ecosystem of higher education, this focus on

the digital dimension needs to shift to encompass blended, hybrid futures. As students' activities span from on campus to online and even on the go, and hybrid working at scale becomes commonplace, leadership capabilities need to address the inherent complexities of such a reality, which the aforementioned Code of Practice describes as "challenges ... of collaboration, integration, team management and communication".

The so-called "bricks and mortar" – the physical, co-located foundation of the campus and the office – was not without its challenges, but at least it was a known entity for leaders in higher education. This foundation is now shifting due to changes that can currently be observed as hybrid working practices mature and institutions move beyond the models adopted during the pandemic and seek to establish new ways of working that succeed long-term.

...institutions move beyond the models adopted during the pandemic and seek to establish new ways of working that succeed long-term.

Moving from policy to long-term practice, this means that leaders and managers now work with teams across a wide spectrum of working patterns, communication preferences, and role requirements. Negotiating the balance between employee preferences and the institution's operational and strategic needs, setting boundaries between private home life and professional practice, and delineating responsibilities between leaders and their teams for collaboration and communication are emerging necessities. In this context, effective digital leadership is no longer focused solely on making intelligent use of technology.

In the increasingly hybrid workplace, digital leadership becomes fundamental to building trust and providing accountability, promoting mental and physical well-being, and ensuring parity between colleagues working remotely and on campus. Successful leadership in this context may involve emerging leadership approaches that blend informal and formal elements, and it might include such approaches as team communications deepened by the use of custom emojis and sharing stories alongside walking meetings.

Developing new approaches needed for digital leadership in this context offers an exciting opportunity to reinvent a crisis solution, to grow hybrid working into an inclusive and equitable reality that reflects the unique character, history, and values of the institution.

However, it is also challenging, as hybrid working at this scale is relatively recent in most sectors, and thus strategic training for managers and leaders is evolving slowly and largely falls back on tried and tested approaches not necessarily fit for the new paradigm.

So Where do Leaders in Higher Education Look for Inspiration?

In a sector perceived as being slow to adapt to change, it is often industry that provides examples of rapid innovation from which we can learn. In this particular context, however, with institutions seeking to develop the next generation of digital leaders fit for blended learning and hybrid working, I would argue that higher education's expertise in fostering student success is the key to staying ahead. Let the rich sectoral knowledge in learning design and blended delivery be leveraged to develop innovative approaches to workforce engagement, retention, and performance.

Now is the time to explore higher education's expertise in teaching and learning in a digital world to inform new approaches to digital leadership, through critically applying digital technologies to enhance hybrid working and overall digital capability in the workplace for current staff as well as the workforce of tomorrow – our students.

Student Success and Hybrid Working Employability

A strategic approach to learning from student experiences can reap great insights; learning technology professionals have worked in partnership with students and staff for decades to design and deliver the best possible experience for a diverse range of learners. Student success, defined by Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2019) as "developing a vision of success, in partnership with students, with the aim of providing all students with the opportunity to fulfil their potential and become creators of new knowledge who are community engaged, ethically conscious, professionally competent and equipped to flourish in a global world", provides many of the ingredients needed to shape the vision of a similarly successful hybrid workplace.

Institutions in higher education can apply lessons learnt from supporting students through blended learning in all its richness, from HyFlex to flipped classrooms, to shaping institutional digital leadership practices in order to promote more flexible and equitable hybrid working, too.

Institutions in higher education can apply lessons learnt from supporting students through blended learning in all its richness...

The evolving understanding of student success – including creating opportunities for students to "recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society" (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2019) – provides an important reference point for digital leadership in the hybrid

workplace. In the same context, the digital skills developed by students for learning and teaching can form the foundation for increased employability in the modern workplace, as the next section of this report will explore.

The 2013–15 work of the National Forum explored the "ability of learners to make successful transitions at key points in their education [as being] crucial for their development and for enabling their success in and through higher education". The research highlights the need for institutions to support learners in the transitions into higher education and between work and learning, and to shift from "one mode of learning (e.g. full-time, conventional) to another (e.g. distance, blended or e-learning modes)". As such, it provides an important foundation for a greater understanding of the challenges faced by institutions today in the advent of blended learning and hybrid working at scale, as these change the nature of the transitions (for example, entering a new institution or workplace while being in one's own home) as well as blur the boundaries between different aspects of life, such as the personal and professional.

While in higher education, student populations often manage competing priorities of both personal and professional obligations, which can range from paid work to responsibilities caring for rapidly ageing populations. In Ireland, Higher Education Authority (HEA) figures from 2022 (Erskine & Harmon, 2023) show that 69% of full-time students and 89% of part-time students worked during "lecture-free" periods. While further research into the number of student carers is underway at time of writing, a 2024 estimate puts the figure at between "7,704 and 15,407 student carers in HEIs in Ireland" (Pierce, 2024).

Although the majority of the work done by the National Forum (n.d.) under the "Teaching for Transitions" theme was undertaken before blended learning and hybrid working was prevalent at today's scale, many of the key lessons learnt and published as "10 Things We Have Learned About Transitions" retain their relevance and can directly be translated into this new context.

For instance, "Digital skills matter" was one of the key lessons learnt, and the related conclusion can be directly translated into today's context: "The possibilities of technology need to empower and excite teachers and learners, not alienate or diminish their central role in [blended] teaching and learning, particularly at key transition points [for example, as learners move into the hybrid workplace]".

Another example is the finding that "Connectedness and being cared about matters". The research demonstrated clearly that

> students need, value, appreciate and learn best if they are learning in contexts where they feel cared about, where teachers have and use time to get to know them, and where they know that they can rely on authentic and attentive support inside and outside the classroom both from academic and support staff and from students.

Similar to the example above, when substituting students with employees and the education context with the workplace, this lesson can be applied directly to the challenges of digital leadership in the hybrid workplace.

From research to practice, it becomes evident that Ireland's higher education sector has a rich body of knowledge in understanding student success, and it offers many openly licensed tools and resources that could be translated more widely from an educational context into professional development for digital leadership in the hybrid workplace.

One example of this is the use of persona-based approaches, such as the National Forum's Persona Generator (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021), designed "to consider the multifaceted lived experiences of students and staff and to ensure that the impact of any planned policy, practice or action is considered across the diversity of the student and staff community/population".

Use of the Staff Persona Generator could offer a practical starting point for translating high-level hybrid working policies at the national or institutional level into strategies for digital leaders and managers.

The persona generator provides nuanced examples of staff personas, such as:

- Staff member A is a lecturer who is employed on a seasonal contract and is in the early stages of their career. They are technologically disadvantaged and are mainly teaching via blended learning for a micro-credential where the majority of teaching takes place in the workplace.
- Staff member B is a librarian who is a visiting scholar and is in the later stage of their career. They are from an ethnic minority and are mainly teaching face-to-face on block release where the majority of teaching takes place on campus during twilight/evening/weekend hours.
- Staff member C is a student affairs professional who is part-time on a fixed-term contract and is in the mid-stage of their career. They are supporting their family and are mainly teaching via blended learning for a Minor/Supplemental/Special Purpose Award where the majority of teaching takes place online.

Testing hybrid working practices and team-specific policies against such persona-based scenarios enables leaders and managers to find blind spots in their practice and identify potential problems.

Persona-based learning design approaches have gained widespread use in the UK and elsewhere. The Open University in the UK, for example, has developed templates for student personas (2024) and study profiles (2020) that could also be translated into the workplace.

Applying insights about student success and learning design to wider working practices within the institution also requires a shift in thinking. For instance, in higher education the importance of working in partnership with students, fostering agency and engagement, has increased. Correspondingly, one may argue, there is a perceptible shifting of the power balance between employee and employer in the contemporary hybrid working environment, as new norms of working are being negotiated.

In an education context, the aim is for learners to develop digital and critical skills, to become empowered in their learning through peer learning, collaboration, and self-directed inquiry. Teaching and learning are designed to inspire students' curiosity and critical thinking, and to whet their appetite for finding things out for themselves. Similarly, the advent of hybrid working places a greater emphasis on the empowerment of employees – not simply in terms of legal rights, such as the right to request flexible or remote working, but also when it comes to day-to-day communication and collaboration.

A practical example of how this is manifested in a working context is the emergence of personal user manuals or operational manuals. These resources, which are used for employee onboarding and team building by institutions including Northwestern University (n.d.) in the United States and BCcampus in Canada, are designed for staff to articulate their preferences when it comes to communication, receiving feedback, work set-up, and work–life balance.

Although not a new tool, this type of resource is gaining popularity in the context of increased hybrid and remote working, and is used as part of onboarding, team building, and managing performance. Crucially for leaders and managers, it combines insights into personal preferences (such as communication medium and frequency) with practical constraints (e.g. childcare or school pickup) to help bring the lived experience of working remotely into a more readily accessible space in which individuals and teams can learn how to work together better

Digital Leadership in Practice

In broader terms, there is a clear need for current and future employees, i.e. staff and students alike, to develop the capabilities needed to successfully navigate work in future, or what we might call "hybrid working skills". These can be grouped into three themes:

1. Digital capabilities including critical digital and data literacies
2. Digital well-being in relation to physical, mental, and social health
3. Digital and practical workspace management

Higher education leaders seeking to enhance support for student success and employability need to focus on all three elements. Let us examine each of these in turn:

Digital Capabilities

This is the most established of the three capability groups, and institutions have widely adopted frameworks such as the HEDC Framework or the Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework and Discovery Tool to measure and develop these skills in students and staff. In the context of applying digital capabilities in the hybrid workplace, the following aspects, however, take on greater significance:

Personal Digital Productivity.
HEIs seek to support students with a seamless experience, providing digital services that are often interlinked and specifically designed to meet student needs. The use of digital platforms and services can be more disjointed in the workplace, especially when switching employers or during short-term contracts, and thus requires more flexibility and the ability to adapt. Personal digital productivity across a range of platforms and the ability to switch between them, as well as learning how to use new tools quickly and effectively, is key.

This perspective on personal digital productivity can be aligned with the aforementioned "Teaching for Transitions" ethos already established by the work of the National Forum, which institutions can build on when developing digital capabilities.

Critical Digital, AI, and Data Literacies.
The focus in higher education on academic integrity and pedagogy provides a strong foundation for digital, AI, and data literacies in the workplace. Such skills can be directly translated into designing efficient workflows, project management, and research. However, in a workplace context, there is a much greater need for producing results quickly, incentivising employees to devise approaches that are "good enough" to get the job done, rather than as good as possible.

In this context, effective digital leadership could help students understand the wider applicability of the skills and approaches they are taught, expanding their relevance for meeting the institution's requirements to developing the ability to navigate similar situations in the workplace.

Privacy and Managing your Digital Footprint.
Workplace surveillance is on the increase. Similar to the discourse around student privacy and the use of webcams during the Covid-19 pandemic, there are valid concerns about the growing use of tracking devices to monitor and measure employee movements, productivity, and even keystrokes. Just as Virtual Learning Environments become ever more sophisticated at measuring student engagement and provide detailed data about their activities online, so are the platforms used for collaboration and communication in the workplace collating information with little transparency. Thus, the skills students acquire during their time in higher education – learning about how to manage their digital footprint and protect their privacy – are becoming crucial to working practices as well.

The need to navigate both the risks and opportunities of increasingly sophisticated digital platforms is an example of why it is essential to develop digital maturity in higher education, with digital leadership bridging the strategic disconnect between senior leadership and what innovation may be happening in individual classrooms or teams (Jameson et al., 2022). What is required is a shift from operational management of technology and its implementation to enhancement of the student experience and development of student success attributes.

Digital Well-Being

It is important to be clear what is meant by the term "digital well-being", as this differs across sectors. In the wider context of digital health, it can mean using technology, applications, websites, or online services to help individuals manage their health and well-being. In the workplace, and specifically in an increasingly hybrid workplace, the term "digital well-being" or "digital wellness" is often used to describe how the use of digital technologies impacts our physical, mental, or emotional health and well-being, for example screen fatigue or stress caused by digital overwhelm and constantly being connected (Deepwell, 2024).

In one context, technology is seen as a solution to managing health and well-being, and in the other technology must be managed to improve health and well-being. In higher education, the second meaning of digital well-being is most relevant, in the interest of increasing student and staff awareness of and control over their relationship with digital technology.

Further to that, hybrid working at scale has only been established for a relatively short period of time (especially in higher education), so we are only just beginning to see its impact on health and well-being in the long-term and the risks it poses for occupational health. In addition to physical and mental health, social health takes on a bigger significance in the hybrid workplace, as employees may suffer from a sense of isolation, miss connecting with colleagues in person, and lose confidence in social situations in the long term.

In addition to physical and mental health, social health takes on a bigger significance in the hybrid workplace...

As with other aspects of developing capabilities for hybrid working, context is the biggest challenge for leaders and managers. What is beneficial versus detrimental to individual members of staff, in terms of well-being, depends on a range of different factors from the job role to the working pattern, location, and set-up. It may also depend on individual use of technology outside of work, the wider social and cultural context, and so forth. For example, an introverted researcher with a dedicated home office who lives alone is likely to have a very different experience of the same institutional hybrid-working policy from a member of support staff who is always on call and who has small children at home.

Leaders of hybrid teams may need to navigate these complexities when it comes to keeping oversight, building trust, and managing performance. Employing persona-based approaches can help institutions devise effective policies and cultivate greater awareness of the complexities involved, enhancing digital leadership on a practical and strategic level.

Just as policies and leadership practice have to take this more complex context into account, professional development in digital well-being is correspondingly not a one-size-fit-all teaching scenario. Although some advice will be helpful and relevant to most, it's largely a case of cultivating a sense of awareness – of curiosity, even – to start with. Although self-assessment surveys and tools can help identify practical needs, inquiry-based approaches may be best suited to address the topic alongside resources and course designs, helping participants to analyse and reflect on what aspects of hybrid working most impact their digital well-being and why. The aim overall should be to increase awareness and offer tools to help leadership start noticing what is working and what isn't.

In my view, many approaches to digital well-being in the hybrid workplace are ineffective because they place the responsibility to engage in healthy behaviour firmly

on the employee alone. While individuals know, for example, that they should take more frequent breaks from staring at their screens, the pace of work mediated by technology can often feel relentless, amplified by constant notifications across multiple channels. The cadence of hybrid working, mediated by digital technologies, thus makes it difficult to follow even the most common-sense advice. Anecdotal data suggests many staff do not take enough breaks and continue to work over lunch while eating at their desk.

Providing structural support for digital well-being at all levels of digital leadership within an institution is thus key to managing the risks associated with prolonged use of digital technologies common to both blended learning and hybrid working. For example, managers of teams can set a positive example by enforcing work–life boundaries or articulating how they balance the demands of work with digital well-being. This may be by finishing work on time, avoiding sending emails out of hours, or explicitly articulating a "no need to respond outside of normal working hours" policy.

Across faculties and departments, digital leadership can play a role in shaping how staff (and students) are engaged in, for example, strategic consultations. The structures that foster well-being, connection, and community are key to the wider well-being of the institution.

For instance, what was commonly an all-staff away day in person prior to 2020 may indeed simply be translated into a long online conference call, but the role of digital leaders is to consider what might be lost in translation and to ensure the richness of institutional life isn't lost amidst digital transformation.

The risks related to poor digital well-being should inform efforts in equipping students as well as staff with the skills to grow their awareness of their own digital well-being in relation to their physical, mental, and social health. Institutions and their leaders have the opportunity to empower their communities not only during their time in higher education but as they transition into the workplace.

Digital and Practical Workspace Management

"Digital and practical workplace management" is a term used to describe the capability of working well across different contexts – at home or on campus, for instance – and of applying digital capabilities and digital well-being strategies appropriately for each context. This section explores why this skill set is so important and its implications for digital leadership.

Blended learning and hybrid working offer flexibility and choice: students now have more options when it comes to the where, when, and how of studying. Similarly,

hybrid working offers employees greater freedom. In that context, hybrid working has "the potential to support inclusion and fairness by opening the labour market to employees who cannot work in traditional office-based roles. But, if poorly managed, it could also worsen existing inequalities and create new 'in and out' groups" (CIPD, 2024).

Through legislative and policy changes such as the aforementioned *Code of Practice for Employers and Employees* (WRC, 2024), employers now have established approaches for ensuring what we might term "fair allocation of work, opportunities and voice" (CIPD, 2024) in hybrid workplaces. In practical terms, this means that hybrid and flexible work arrangements should not only meet the aforementioned employee rights but also foster trust, an equitable and transparent distribution of work across different roles, and a review process to assess how effective hybrid working arrangements are in practice.

Further to that, and in relation to promoting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, there is a need to consider the impact of hybrid working in the long term on staff recruitment and retention, promotion, reward, and performance management. In addition, employers should identify potential inclusion risks that relate specifically to hybrid and remote work. From a strategic perspective, institutions are advised to take "steps to ensure equality of experience between employees in the office and employees at home" (WRC, 2024).

...employers should identify potential inclusion risks that relate specifically to hybrid and remote work.

Now, at first glance this might seem like common-sense advice, and indeed many employers will have a similar approach outlined in their policies. When reflecting on what this means for digital leadership in practice, however – and specifically how managers and leaders ensure equality of experience between office and at home – it quickly becomes clear that translating this into practice can prove challenging. Leaders aiming to ensure equality of experience between office and at home need to navigate the crucial overlap that hybrid and home working necessitate: the blending of home and work, of personal and professional, of private and institutional.

This overlap of professional and personal became more apparent during the pandemic, when seasoned TV broadcasters were interrupted by family members or pets live on air, and these interruptions became a common sight for viewers at home as lockdowns continued. In parallel, staff in universities quickly became more familiar

with seeing work colleagues' partners, children, and home life in the background during meetings and classes. As populations progressed through the months of lockdown and continued to work from home, stuck in confined spaces, the boundaries between work and home continued to blur.

For many educators, and in particular for learning technology professionals responsible for keeping the whole online pivot happening day in day out, the impact of this intense stress and trauma remain present. Digital leadership plays an important role in helping individuals and institutions to move beyond crisis norms and to re-establish boundaries between work and rest instead of blurring them further.

This ability to navigate work across different contexts – at home or on campus, for instance – and being able to apply digital capabilities and digital well-being strategies appropriately for each context, is what we mean by digital and practical workplace management. This is a key skill that both students and staff require in order to succeed in the hybrid workplace.

From an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion perspective, what is especially challenging for leaders negotiating the overlap between personal and professional is how broad a spectrum of factors impact the home sphere, both in general (such as socio-economic factors) and during specific crises (such as a natural disaster, a death in the family, or domestic abuse). The home becoming the workplace on a regular basis and in the long term adds obvious complexities from a human resources perspective, but also on a strategic level for managers and leaders. At least with co-located learning and working on campus, there is a greater level of control over the environment, distractions, and available tools. There is also a clearer delineation of who is responsible for what.

When it comes to learning or working across a whole range of contexts, these aspects shift to a less controlled, less clearly defined model; this places greater emphasis on the capabilities needed to inclusively communicate and collaborate.

In addition to these important issues, bringing work into the home also has technology-driven consequences, in terms of both learning and work. Digital technology is not neutral; it is inherently political and biased. Although across sectors we have developed frameworks for the ethical use of technology in education, such as the Association for Learning Technology's (ALT) (2021) Framework for Ethical Learning Technology (FELT) and UNESCO's (2024) AI competency frameworks for students and teachers, rapid technological development makes it challenging for policymakers to keep pace.

Instead, tools and platforms widely used in education and the workplace to collaborate and connect gather data about users and the ways employees carry out

work. Similar to data-driven approaches in education, "people analytics" is becoming more prevalent as more and more businesses move to hybrid working platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Google Workspace. Google's re:Work platform champions the potential of people analytics thus:

> When faced with a challenging people issue (e.g., are we losing our organisation's highest performers and why?) or an important people decision (e.g., who should lead this new initiative?), the conventional approach is to engage in endless debate based on emotions, instincts and anecdotes. We believe instead that an analytical approach incorporating facts and science can lead to more effective and fair solutions and decisions. (Google re:Work, 2022)

Similar arguments are used in education in the context of learner analytics. In the workplace, relying on data in this way also brings with it similar issues around (lack of) trust and prompts ethical considerations. For example, one might ask whether employees are aware of what data is being collected on them via remote working platforms or video conferencing tools and what it is being used for. Or whether employees have access to the data that is being collected and what degree of transparency there is for the subsequent data-driven decision-making process.[2] Questions arise as to whether employees may opt out of using specific tools or platforms or whether the use of such technology is mandatory. During the crisis response in 2020, universities worked very hard to balance the risks to their IT infrastructure with enabling learning and teaching (and assessment) to continue. Now that institutions are moving to long-term adoption of enterprise-level technology for students and staff, appropriate policies and contracts of employment fit for a hybrid workforce need to be in place.

One key consideration is the aforementioned right to disconnect outside of formal working hours, which is already enshrined in law in many countries, including Ireland. But what, leaders may ask, about the right to the data that is being collected as work moves more and more into the digital domain?

Oversight that may have been appropriate in a traditional office campus takes on a different significance when extended into the private sphere of the home. The use of webcams by students for learning or during proctored exams is a helpful example here when considering the implications of technology used in the home for working, and many helpful parallels can be drawn between the experience of students and employees to inform both policy and practice.

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[2]See Pope et al. (2024), also in the National Digital Leadership Network report series, for further exploration of data-driven decision making in higher education.

From a leadership perspective, when home and work life boundaries blur, as they inevitably do to a greater extent with hybrid working, it can feel artificial or inappropriate to revert to formal management approaches. Yet, in many situations, established management approaches are what leaders rely on to keep oversight, manage performance, and motivate staff. Replacing "the office" with working from home brings the domestic reality of life much closer to the surface, and for managers this can present new challenges that shouldn't be left up to algorithms or people analytics to solve. Data-informed approaches have their utility, but, ultimately, successful hybrid working practices won't be determined by digital technology but by human beings.

Work, like education, is a human endeavour. The affordances of technology are great, yet the future of the workplace must be shaped around the needs of human beings, not algorithms. Not dashboards, but empathy and awareness of the wider context within which staff and students operate are key assets for leaders.

Conclusions: Hybrid Working and Blended Learning Beyond a Digital Deficit Model

Now is the time to forge a vision beyond simply translating traditional office cultures and processes to an online arena. Digital leaders need to imagine beyond the kind of "office deficit model" that is to hybrid working what the one-way online lecture is to blended learning: the work equivalent of 500 students listening to a lecturer speak uninterrupted for an hour, with their cameras switched off and no interaction.

Since 2020, we have seen first-hand that moving beyond the constraints of the traditional workplace can offer a freedom and flexibility that enables organisations to define and refine new ways of working that benefit both the individual and the organisation. In parallel to questions asked about the efficacy of blended learning, similar questions have been asked about hybrid working; these arguments are still playing out across the globe.

Can hybrid work or remote work be as good as working alongside others in person? Can we make it beneficial for both employees and employers, or are the downsides too significant in the long term?

Leaders in higher education are at an advantage here. A rich body of research, practice, and policy can help translate the lessons learnt from blended learning into an expertise that can guide our approach to hybrid working. Just as we appreciate the rich spectrum of learning design approaches needed for student success, we can begin to formulate a vision for the future of work in hybrid institutions.

Open Education Leadership Approaches

> "Yet change is possible, both change responding to flaws in the sector and proactive change aiming to prioritise values that are just, humane, and globally sustainable."
>
> Catherine Cronin and Laura Czerniewicz
> *Higher Education for Good* (2023)

Digital leadership offers powerful institutional strategies for meeting the challenges of a world impacted by accelerating environmental and technological change. In *Higher Education for Good* (2023), Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin curated contributions from across higher education sectors globally to paint a picture of hope for higher education. This award-winning project exemplifies leadership in practice in a higher education context that is fast evolving and complex, and it shows us how

responses to the new era of hybrid working and blended learning on a global scale can be forged.

One approach that has long been pioneered in higher education, in Ireland as well as globally, is open education, from research to policy and practice. Openness in the context of hybrid working and leadership can be translated into five principles: transparency, inclusivity, adaptability, collaboration, and community (Open Organization Ambassadors, 2017). In open organisations defined thus, transparency is key. Decisions are transparent to the extent that everyone affected by them understands the processes by which they were informed. Work is transparent to the extent that colleagues can monitor progress and provide input where needed. Openness in collaboration and communication enables teams to work together effectively and helps create greater parity between colleagues on campus and at home. Openness in this context also offers ways for staff to achieve a wider sense of alignment to strategic objectives and organisational values. Especially for leaders in digital transformation, an open approach can bring to the surface what alternative sources of continuity a team may rely on when uncertainty and change are constant.

In *Leading Effective Virtual Teams: Overcoming Time and Distance to Achieve Exceptional Results*, Nancy Settle-Murphy (2013) shares one example using a type of SWOT analysis (Hall, 2017) to create a greater measure of understanding in a distributed or hybrid workforce by focusing on strategic goals and sharing a long-term vision. She argues that part of the unique challenges of hybrid teams is that "it's harder for team members to tell whether they're out of alignment about important issues ... and once out of alignment, it takes teams much longer to pull back together". This type of leadership challenge offers insights into what is required of effective digital leaders. Settle-Murphy goes on to highlight one of the challenges for (remote team) leaders, that is, "ensuring that all share the same understanding of team goals"; the more transparency and openness we can foster, the more we can arrive at a shared understanding of such goals and values.

Open education practices offer practical inspiration for how to move beyond a model that is defined by what we might call a digital deficit, that is, the assumption that online collaboration and communication – whether in learning or at work – can only ever be second best to the "real thing" or in-person equivalent. This kind of dichotomy of thought is what digital leaders must help institutions and individuals to see beyond, in order to leverage the power of the full range of both analogue and digital tools and platforms available across higher education.

Just as in learning and teaching, it is not the technology that determines whether we can create a sustainable future for hybrid work. Each individual employee should

mean more than a data point on an analytics dashboard, just as students are more than their grade point averages. As we navigate the interplay between home and campus, personal and professional, digital leadership requires a reflective and critical perspective that is informed by the contextual complexities.

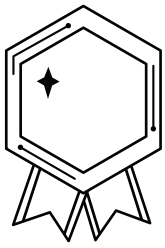
Recommendations

This report has shown that hybrid working is here to stay. Over the past five years, policy, legal frameworks, and practice have shifted across the higher education sector in Ireland and beyond, and this shift constitutes a long-term change that leaders must act on.

Hybrid working brings with it a blurring of the boundaries between home and work, between personal and professional. Organisations and their leaders seeking to build resilience and ensure that policies are robust need to reconsider what being a professional truly means in the newly flexible hybrid workplace. Across sectors, and especially in education, large-scale hybrid working challenges many implicit and explicit views about what it means to be an employer or employee.

Just as the concept of who the "typical" student is has evolved to a more diverse, inclusive understanding of learners today, so must our vision for staff develop in the context of hybrid working.

This set of recommendations provides practical starting points for leaders seeking to effectively navigate the global trend towards hybrid working. Each recommendation includes practical steps for building the digital capabilities required for both students and staff alongside strategy and policy.

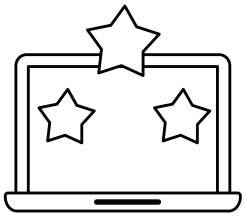


1. Enhance digital capabilities:
Staff and students should continue to enhance digital capabilities, specifically in relation to personal digital productivity, and to critical digital and data literacies. This may include:

1.1 Providing appropriate continued professional development at an individual and institutional level

1.2 Designing training for students to help transfer study skills into the hybrid workplace, including managing work–life balance, digital well-being, and personal data/privacy

1.3 Ensuring policies for hybrid working take into account the impact of home working through different life stages and in response to major life events, similar to existing parental leave or relocation policies

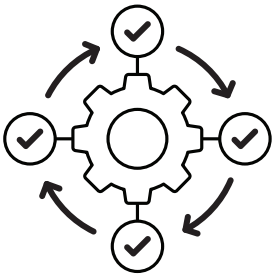


2. Expand student success attributes:
Establish digital fluency in the hybrid workplace as a student success attribute in consultation with employers. This may include:

2.1 Consultation across institutions, and with employers across sectors, to expand student success attributes

2.2 Increasing awareness among students and staff of how digital capabilities can be translated between education and the workplace

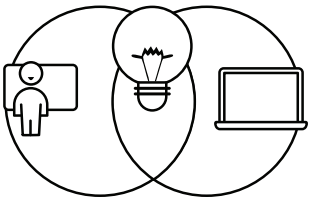
2.3 Including digital capabilities relating to core hybrid working competencies in sector frameworks and policies, including, for example ,communication, collaboration, building trust, keeping oversight, and setting work–life boundaries



3. Develop hybrid leadership in partnership:
Institutions and their leaders can learn from partnership models with students when engaging staff in shaping approaches to effective hybrid collaboration and communication. This may include:

3.1 Engaging staff through consultation to articulate clear expectations for hybrid workers setting out institutional norms for communication, collaboration, and work–life balance that are fair and transparent

3.2 Moving beyond recreating the in-person office processes online, when better or more appropriate methods may be available. Leaders and their teams may benefit from professional development, taking into account the diverse requirements of specific job roles and potential inequalities between roles



4. Leverage blended learning expertise:
Institutions and their leaders should apply lessons learnt from blended learning to hybrid working and leverage their expertise in learning design to shape policies and practices. This may include:

4.1 Acknowledging the potential as well as the limitations of technology and ensuring workplace policies are shaped around the needs of human beings, not algorithms

4.2 Applying lessons learnt from successful learning design, such as the persona approach, in order to help leaders and managers develop greater empathy and awareness of the wider context within which staff work

5. Examine the wider impact of hybrid policies:
Institutions are encouraged to take a reflective approach when adapting to the new legal and policy frameworks for flexible and hybrid working, considering their impact across the whole institution and its diverse stakeholders. This may include:

5.1 Offering dedicated support, policies, and appropriate training specifically for managers and leaders

5.2 Auditing existing policies to identify potential structural inequalities between in-person/on-campus and home-based employees

5.3 Examine how senior leadership practice reflects the institution's hybrid working policies and how senior leaders can set an example for equitable, sustainable, and healthy hybrid working

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