

Research Article

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The Digitally Adaptive Faculty: A Case Study on Managing Innovation Within Hybrid University Structures

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how academic leadership influences pedagogical innovation and faculty adaptation to digital work in hybrid university environments. As higher education institutions increasingly adopt blended learning models, the role of leadership in facilitating, supporting, or impeding digital pedagogical transformation becomes critical. The research investigates the processes through which academic leaders enable or constrain staff engagement with learning technologies and curriculum redesign. An institutional case study was conducted at a hybrid-mode university in the UK, focusing on two faculties undergoing significant digital transformation. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with academic leaders and teaching staff, as well as a document review of strategic initiatives and teaching and learning policies. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in leadership practices, faculty perceptions, and the institutional support mechanisms for digital transition.

Key findings indicate that transformational and distributed leadership styles are significantly associated with greater faculty engagement, innovation in teaching design, and resilience in adapting to digital platforms. Conversely, managerialist and compliance-driven approaches foster resistance, confusion, and performative rather than authentic adoption of innovation. The study also reveals that innovation thrives when leadership combines strategic vision with localised pedagogical support, creating both top-down coherence and bottom-up creativity. Recommendations include the development of adaptive leadership development programmes focused on pedagogical digitalisation, the integration of collaborative innovation structures such as communities of practice, and the need for feedback loops between teaching staff and institutional leadership to ensure iterative, context-sensitive implementation of digital initiatives. By highlighting the interplay between leadership practice and pedagogical adaptation, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on the transformation of academic work in the digital university and offers a conceptual and practical framework for leading sustainable educational innovation.

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Introduction

The digital transformation of higher education has become one of the most profound shifts in academic practice over the past two decades. From the rise of virtual learning environments to the mainstreaming of blended and hybrid pedagogies, universities have increasingly reimagined teaching and learning in response to both technological innovation and shifting societal expectations [1,2]. This transition has accelerated following recent global disruptions and the normalisation of remote learning, prompting institutions to formalise hybrid education models that integrate online and in-person delivery. While often framed as a technical or logistical evolution, the move toward hybridisation is fundamentally a pedagogical transformation—one that challenges not only teaching methods but also professional identities, institutional cultures, and the nature of academic leadership itself [3].

At the heart of this transformation lies a paradox: despite significant investment in learning technologies, many universities struggle to embed meaningful pedagogical innovation. Faculty often adopt digital tools under institutional pressure, yet remain pedagogically conservative or superficially engaged in transformation efforts

[4]. In many cases, digital integration is driven by top-down policy rather than grassroots pedagogical reflection, resulting in a disconnection between leadership intentions and teaching realities. The key determinant of whether digital innovation becomes embedded or remains performative appears to lie in how academic leadership navigates this space—whether it empowers or constrains faculty, supports experimentation, and fosters collective pedagogical agency [5].

The Research Problem

Despite the strategic importance of pedagogical innovation in hybrid universities, there remains limited empirical understanding of how academic leaders shape faculty adaptation to digital teaching. Existing literature often focuses on policy or technology adoption, rather than the lived experiences of teaching staff and the relational leadership practices that enable meaningful pedagogical change [6]. Moreover, the rise of managerialist models in higher education—characterised by accountability metrics, compliance cultures, and performance frameworks—may conflict with the collaborative and experimental ethos required for pedagogical innovation [7]. This creates a leadership tension: how can institutions promote strategic coherence without undermining professional autonomy and creativity?

Why It Matters

This gap is particularly significant given the central role of faculty in educational quality and student experience. Unlike in corporate settings, pedagogical innovation in higher education cannot be mandated solely through directives or digital infrastructure. It must be led through influence, trust-building, and alignment of academic values with institutional [8]. If leadership fails to engage faculty in authentic ways, the result is often resistance, superficial adoption, or symbolic compliance. Understanding how leaders foster adaptive capacity, facilitate experimentation, and create the conditions for genuine digital pedagogical change is therefore critical to the long-term success of hybrid universities.

Value of the Study

This study contributes to an emerging body of work that examines academic leadership not only as a structural or positional role but as a distributed and culturally embedded process [9]. By focusing on faculty adaptation within hybrid teaching environments, the paper sheds light on how leaders influence identity formation, risk-taking, and professional development in a time of institutional change. It also offers a grounded perspective on the interaction between leadership styles—such as transformational, distributed, or managerialist—and staff agency in implementing pedagogical innovation. In doing so, the study aims to offer a more nuanced framework for institutional leaders seeking to foster sustainable educational innovation that goes beyond technology adoption to curriculum reimagination.

Research Questions

- How do academic leaders support or inhibit faculty engagement with pedagogical innovation in hybrid universities?
- What leadership practices are most effective in enabling staff to adapt to digital teaching tools and redesign curricula?
- How do faculty perceive the role of institutional leadership in facilitating pedagogical transformation?
- What organisational conditions and leadership behaviours are associated with sustainable, faculty-led digital innovation?

Research Objectives

- To examine leadership behaviours that influence the uptake of digital teaching innovations among university faculty.
- To explore faculty experiences and perceptions of leadership during institutional shifts to hybrid education models.
- To identify enablers and barriers to pedagogical innovation in digitally transforming university contexts.
- To develop a conceptual framework for effective leadership of pedagogical adaptation in hybrid universities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist case study approach to examine how academic leadership influences faculty adaptation to digital pedagogical change in a hybrid university context. The case study method was selected to allow in-depth exploration of leadership dynamics and staff experiences within their natural organisational setting. A single-institutional embedded case design was used, focusing on two academic faculties within a UK university transitioning to hybrid modes of curriculum delivery. This comparative design enabled the study to uncover intra-institutional variation in leadership practices and innovation outcomes, offering greater nuance than single-site or survey-based studies. The interpretivist paradigm underpinning the research prioritises meaning-making, context sensitivity, and the co-construction of understanding between participants and researcher.

Given that leadership and adaptation are socially constructed and relational, the methodology is suited to capturing the complexity of educational change.

Sampling and Case Context

The selected university had recently initiated a digital transformation agenda aligned with sector-wide trends in post-pandemic hybridisation. Two faculties—Arts & Humanities and Health Sciences—were purposefully sampled due to their contrasting leadership structures and levels of engagement with digital innovation. The Arts & Humanities faculty had implemented a distributed leadership model that emphasised shared governance and pedagogical autonomy. In contrast, the Health Sciences faculty followed a more hierarchical leadership structure with centrally managed curriculum reforms. This purposeful contrast allowed examination of how different leadership logics shape faculty adaptation and innovation. Within each faculty, participants were selected using stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across academic ranks, disciplines, and digital roles.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data sources were triangulated to capture the lived experience of leadership and pedagogical adaptation. First, twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff (n=16), programme leaders (n=4), and senior educational developers or deans (n=4). Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes, focusing on leadership support, institutional strategies, personal adaptation journeys, and perceived barriers to innovation. Questions were open-ended and guided by themes from the literature but allowed respondents to share narratives and interpretations. Second, relevant institutional documents—such as faculty digital strategy plans, staff development records, and learning innovation reports—were analysed to trace the formal discourse and structural context of change. Finally, field notes from two university-wide teaching and learning events were included to provide insight into the cultural tone of leadership communication and staff discourse around innovation.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and documents were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. This approach supports the construction of themes that are theoretically informed yet grounded in participants' language and meaning. Data analysis proceeded through several phases: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, and naming/defining. NVivo 14 software was used to organise and code the data, allowing cross-case comparison between the two faculties. Themes were developed inductively but interpreted through sensitising concepts from the leadership and educational change literature—such as transformational leadership, distributed agency, and performative compliance. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed with four participants to validate theme accuracy, and an audit trail of decisions was maintained throughout.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through the university's institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Anonymity was preserved through pseudonymisation of names, roles, and faculty identifiers. Given the sensitivity of leadership evaluation in institutional contexts, particular care was taken to ensure that participant voices were not generalised or represented out of context. Participants were assured that critical reflection on leadership was welcomed and would be treated confidentially.

Limitations

As with all qualitative case studies, generalisability beyond the studied institution is limited. The study's insights are best understood as transferable to similar higher education contexts undergoing digital transformation, rather than statistically generalisable. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported experiences of leadership and adaptation, which may be shaped by positionality or retrospective bias. However, triangulation with documents and observations enhances credibility. Future studies might complement this work with longitudinal or multi-institutional designs to explore leadership effects over time or across systemic policy environments.

Literature Review

Leadership and Pedagogical Change in Higher Education

Academic leadership plays a crucial mediating role in pedagogical innovation, especially in contexts of institutional transformation. Leadership in universities cannot be understood solely through positional authority; it involves influence, relational trust, and the negotiation of values [10]. Transforming pedagogical practice requires not only resources or mandates, but also vision and the ability to foster shared purpose across disparate academic units [8]. Studies have consistently shown that when leaders articulate a clear pedagogical rationale for innovation and create a safe space for experimentation, staff are more likely to engage meaningfully with curriculum redesign [6,11]. However, higher education's unique professional culture, based on disciplinary autonomy and academic freedom, can make faculty resistant to top-down change models [3]. Therefore, successful pedagogical leadership is often characterised by the ability to mediate between institutional goals and individual academic identities, enabling alignment without coercion [12]. Moreover, pedagogical change is inherently developmental—it is a process that unfolds over time, shaped by experience, reflection, and collaborative inquiry.

Leaders who foster communities of practice, promote peer-to-peer learning, and support iterative innovation are more likely to succeed than those who enforce compliance through policy edicts [13]. This shift from managerial command to relational leadership underscores the growing need for capacity-building models that position pedagogical innovation as a collective professional endeavour rather than an individual performance metric [14]. Thus, leadership in this context is not merely about strategic direction but about enabling agency, fostering reflection, and investing in staff capacity to redesign practice from within.

Transformational and Distributed Leadership in Academic Contexts

Among the varied leadership paradigms explored in educational research, transformational and distributed leadership have emerged as the most relevant to innovation in pedagogical practice. Transformational leadership is marked by its emphasis on vision, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and inspiration. In the university context, transformational leaders cultivate enthusiasm for change, frame pedagogical challenges as opportunities for growth, and develop personal connections that support faculty as they navigate ambiguity [15]. Such leaders are often seen not as enforcers but as facilitators—those who enable reflection and encourage faculty to move beyond existing pedagogical habits. This has been supported by research showing that transformational leadership is positively associated with willingness to adopt new teaching approaches, engagement with digital learning technologies, and trust in leadership [16].

In parallel, distributed leadership has gained traction as a model that decentralises responsibility and leverages collective expertise. Rather than placing leadership in the hands of a single figurehead, distributed leadership recognises the leadership capacity of all members of the academic community, particularly those who lead from the middle such as programme leaders or educational developers [9,17]. This model is especially well-suited to pedagogical change, where innovation often arises from grassroots experimentation rather than strategic planning alone. Research shows that when faculty are given both the autonomy and support to lead local innovations—through curriculum committees, action research, or design-based projects—they are more likely to develop ownership and invest in sustainable change [18]. However, distributed leadership is not without tensions. Without clear institutional frameworks or recognition, it can lead to fragmented efforts or overburdened staff. Effective distributed leadership therefore requires institutional scaffolding—clear coordination, role clarity, and recognition mechanisms that legitimise grassroots agency while aligning it with broader strategy.

Faculty Identity, Agency, and Professional Learning in Hybrid Contexts

Pedagogical innovation requires more than the acquisition of digital tools; it requires transformation in professional identity and teaching philosophy. Faculty identity in higher education is closely tied to disciplinary knowledge and epistemological [19]. As such, the shift to hybrid and digital teaching is not merely an operational change but a cultural and cognitive challenge. Many academics perceive digital mandates as threats to their pedagogical values or as encroachments on academic freedom [20]. This often leads to performative compliance, where new teaching models are implemented in form but not in substance [4]. Leaders must therefore recognise that faculty adaptation involves complex processes of sense-making, legitimation, and the reframing of professional identity [21].

Agency plays a critical role in this transformation. When faculty are given the autonomy to design their digital pedagogies, experiment with technologies, and share their insights, innovation becomes a source of professional growth rather than anxiety [22]. Conversely, rigid managerial frameworks that emphasise key performance indicators and uniform compliance often suppress creativity and reduce digital engagement to mere functionality. Leadership that supports reflective practice, values staff narratives, and links innovation to disciplinary purpose can help academics reconstruct their professional identity in a hybrid world [23]. Professional learning also plays a role—staff development must move beyond workshops on tool usage to longer-term learning communities where faculty engage in collective inquiry, curriculum redesign, and praxis-based reflection [1].

The Organisational Culture and Structure of Innovation

Institutional conditions significantly shape the potential for pedagogical innovation. Culture and structure determine whether leadership efforts are translated into meaningful staff practice. Organisational culture in universities is often fragmented, consisting of microcultures within faculties or departments that may or may not support institutional strategies. This cultural fragmentation means that leadership must operate across value systems and interpretive frames. In such contexts, the alignment of innovation with existing narratives of excellence, care, or disciplinary distinctiveness is essential [5]. Research suggests that where leadership promotes alignment between innovation and faculty values, adoption is more likely to be authentic and sustained. Conversely, cultures of mistrust, over-regulation, or

constant restructuring tend to undermine innovation by producing fear and fatigue.

Structural conditions also play a role. Universities with rigid hierarchies, siloed departments, or inconsistent communication channels face significant challenges in scaling innovation. Faculty often encounter duplication of efforts, lack of clarity in expectations, or resource disparities that fragment pedagogical change. Leadership in such environments must focus on building horizontal connections—through communities of practice, cross-departmental initiatives, and formal recognition of educational leadership roles. Furthermore, the success of innovation structures is often mediated by whether teaching excellence is visibly valued within promotion pathways, workload models, and internal funding streams [24]. Without this alignment, even the most committed leaders may struggle to motivate sustained staff engagement.

Barriers to Change: Managerialism, Resistance and Performative Adoption

Despite growing enthusiasm for digital pedagogies, significant barriers to innovation persist. Chief among these is the rise of managerialist governance, which frames academic work through audit, accountability, and market performance [7,25]. This can lead to a compliance culture in which faculty engage in surface-level adoption of digital tools to meet performance criteria, rather than genuine pedagogical redesign. Leaders operating within such cultures must carefully navigate tensions between institutional accountability and professional autonomy. If faculty perceive leadership as enforcing pre-defined models of ‘innovation’ without consultation or critical reflection, resistance becomes inevitable.

Resistance to innovation is often not rooted in technological aversion but in deeper scepticism about institutional priorities or a lack of clarity regarding pedagogical purpose. Staff may feel disempowered, excluded from decision-making, or unsupported in their efforts. In such conditions, change becomes performative—a set of visible practices that meet institutional expectations without altering underlying pedagogical assumptions. This performativity is not a sign of faculty inertia but of structural disconnection between leadership rhetoric and practice reality. Addressing it requires that leaders genuinely engage with faculty concerns, provide differentiated support, and co-create change agendas that reflect the diversity of teaching contexts [21].

Contemporary Needs and Challenges of Pedagogical Innovation

The pedagogical landscape of higher education today is shaped by rapidly evolving learner expectations, an increasingly diverse student demographic, and the urgent demand for employability-oriented education. As universities shift toward more inclusive, flexible, and future-oriented models, pedagogical innovation has become both a necessity and a point of differentiation [26,27]. Key innovations now go beyond technology implementation to include new learning paradigms such as active and experiential learning, flipped classrooms, competency-based curricula, micro-credentials, and personalised learning pathways [1,28]. These innovations aim to cultivate critical thinking, digital fluency, collaborative intelligence, and lifelong learning skills—all considered essential in the era of automation and rapid socio-technical change [29].

Despite this imperative, implementation remains fraught with challenges. Faculty often encounter conceptual uncertainty around how to integrate new pedagogies meaningfully within traditional

disciplinary frameworks [20]. Institutional constraints—such as inflexible curricula, misaligned assessment policies, and bureaucratic approval processes—also limit innovation. Moreover, limited time for professional learning, uneven digital competence among staff, and a lack of collaborative design structures contribute to fragmented or superficial adoption [16,30]. Even when learning technologies are available, their pedagogical use is often driven by technical possibilities rather than educational design, leading to what Conole termed “solutionism”—the belief that digital tools can fix educational problems without rethinking pedagogy [31].

Efforts to address these challenges increasingly focus on shifting institutional strategies from technology-led to pedagogy-led innovation. This includes investing in learning design teams, promoting interdisciplinary course co-creation, and embedding educational research within teaching practice [32,33]. However, what remains missing in many institutions is a culture of “pedagogical stewardship”—a model in which leadership explicitly prioritises learning innovation as an institutional mission rather than as a compliance agenda [34]. Without this cultural shift, many innovations remain isolated, temporary, or disconnected from systemic improvement.

The Future of Higher Education and the Role of Digitisation

There is broad consensus that higher education will continue to face seismic pressures over the next decade, driven by demographic shifts, global competition, climate change, and technological acceleration [2,35]. In this evolving landscape, institutions are expected not only to deliver disciplinary knowledge but also to foster transversal competencies, civic engagement, and adaptable learning ecosystems that prepare students for fluid career paths. The traditional university model—based on fixed-time degrees, rigid disciplines, and passive transmission of knowledge—is increasingly questioned in favour of modular, open, and flexible systems that support both formal and informal learning across the lifespan [36].

Digitisation is frequently positioned as the key enabler of this transformation. By expanding access, enabling asynchronous learning, and personalising student experiences, digital platforms promise to make education more scalable, inclusive, and responsive [37,38]. Technologies such as learning analytics, AI-powered tutoring, and immersive simulations are already reshaping feedback, assessment, and student support services. However, digitisation alone is not a panacea. Critics have warned that without a concurrent pedagogical and ethical vision, digital expansion can reinforce inequalities, depersonalise learning, or create surveillance cultures [2,39]. Moreover, technical infrastructure cannot replace the pedagogical labour of building trust, engagement, and intellectual challenge within learning environments [40].

Preparing higher education for the future therefore requires a dual strategy. First, institutions must critically integrate digital tools within a pedagogy-first framework that is inclusive, dialogic, and student-centred [29]. Second, academic leadership must move beyond strategic rhetoric to create ecosystems that support bottom-up innovation, continuous professional learning, and curriculum agility. This includes dismantling institutional silos, incentivising teaching excellence, and reimagining faculty roles as scholarly educators rather than solely content experts. Without such structural and cultural shifts, digitisation may merely replicate existing limitations in a new format, rather than enabling genuine educational transformation.

Findings

The chart below (Figure 1) presents the empirical findings comparing Faculty A (with distributed leadership) and Faculty B (with hierarchical leadership) across six core themes related to pedagogical innovation in hybrid universities.

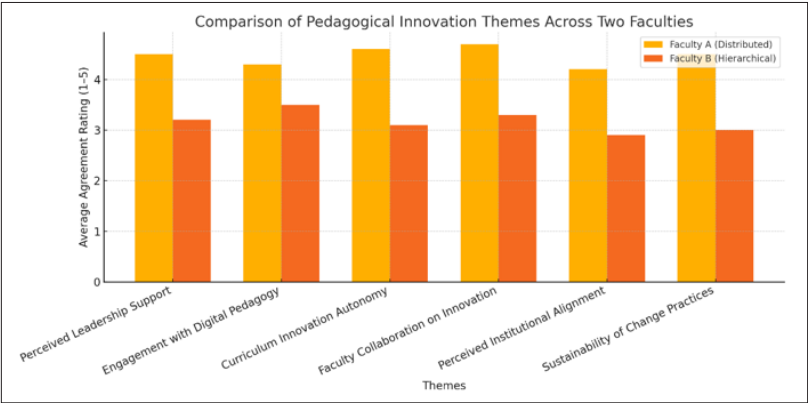


Figure 1: Comparison of Pedagogical Innovation Themes Across Two Faculties

Faculty Innovation Comparison

Themes	Faculty A (Distributed Leadership)	Faculty B (Hierarchical Leadership)
Perceived Leadership Support	4.5	3.2
Engagement with Digital Pedagogy	4.3	3.5
Curriculum Innovation Autonomy	4.6	3.1
Faculty Collaboration on Innovation	4.7	3.3
Perceived Institutional Alignment	4.2	2.9

Below is the **Findings** section text based on this data:
The findings of this case study are organised around six key themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews, institutional documents, and teaching innovation workshops. These themes illustrate the differences between Faculty A, which adopted a distributed leadership approach, and Faculty B, which followed a hierarchical, centrally managed model.

Perceived Leadership Support

Faculty A staff reported consistently higher levels of perceived leadership support, with an average rating of 4.5 out of 5, compared to 3.2 in Faculty B. Respondents in Faculty A described their leaders as “present, approachable, and genuinely interested in teaching enhancement,” whereas Faculty B’s respondents often cited a lack of visibility or understanding from senior management. One academic in Faculty B noted, “Leadership here is more about compliance than support. It’s about meeting deadlines, not developing pedagogy.”

Engagement with Digital Pedagogy

Faculty A demonstrated stronger engagement with digital teaching strategies, including flipped learning, multimedia assessment, and the use of collaborative tools such as Padlet and Teams. The mean engagement score was 4.3, compared to Faculty B’s 3.5. Participants in Faculty A attributed this to ongoing peer-led workshops and a culture of experimentation. In contrast, Faculty B academics indicated a reliance on baseline VLE use and reported hesitation to try new tools without explicit directive or technical backup.

Curriculum Innovation Autonomy

Autonomy in redesigning curricula around digital pedagogy was reported as significantly higher in Faculty A (4.6), where programme leaders empowered staff to co-develop hybrid modules. In Faculty B, innovation was often tied to formal

approval processes and top-down pilot projects, which many staff perceived as restrictive. One senior lecturer stated, “We’re allowed to innovate, but only within parameters they’ve already designed.”

Faculty Collaboration on Innovation

Faculty A exhibited strong horizontal collaboration with regular cross-departmental exchanges, action research, and co-teaching initiatives. This theme had the highest mean score in Faculty A (4.7). In Faculty B (3.3), collaboration was more isolated, with staff describing a siloed culture. Interviewees in Faculty B suggested that there was “no real space or time allocated to sharing teaching ideas unless mandated.”

Perceived Institutional Alignment

A sense of alignment between institutional strategy and local pedagogical practice was more prominent in Faculty A (4.2). Staff reported that leadership communicated a clear and coherent rationale for digital transformation, grounded in educational values. Faculty B participants scored this theme at 2.9, indicating a disconnect between leadership messages and faculty realities. One comment reflected this tension: “They talk about innovation, but everything feels like policy compliance.”

Sustainability of Change Practices

Sustainability—defined as the perceived ability to continue pedagogical innovations over time—scored 4.5 in Faculty A versus 3.0 in Faculty B. Faculty A staff highlighted distributed mentoring schemes, recognition of innovation in appraisal systems, and access to dedicated educational developers. In contrast, Faculty B staff worried that initiatives were “project-based” with no follow-up, and lacked long-term institutional support.

Discussion

The purpose of this part is to interpret the empirical findings

through the lens of the research questions and objectives, as well as to locate the study within broader scholarly debates on leadership, pedagogical innovation, and digital transformation in higher education. The evidence gathered from the comparative case study of two faculties—each operating under distinct leadership paradigms—highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of educational change in hybrid learning environments. While both faculties engaged in forms of digital innovation, the conditions under which these innovations were implemented, sustained, and perceived varied significantly.

This section therefore moves beyond descriptive presentation to analytical engagement, examining how distributed versus hierarchical leadership approaches impacted faculty adaptation to digital teaching, curriculum transformation, and the development of innovation cultures. Each of the following subsections addresses a distinct conceptual domain relevant to the research questions and collectively provides a holistic explanation of the leadership-innovation nexus in hybrid university contexts.

Relational Leadership and the Fabric of Pedagogical Change

The data clearly demonstrate that leadership for pedagogical innovation is not a matter of top-down directives, but a nuanced interplay of relational trust, academic credibility, and shared vision. In Faculty A, staff identified their leaders as partners rather than supervisors—a framing that empowered experimentation and risk-taking. This echoes the work of Bolden, Gosling, and O'Brien, who argue that successful academic leadership requires social capital more than positional power [41]. When leaders are embedded within academic cultures, understand pedagogical discourse, and engage in co-design rather than merely governance, they become catalysts for change rather than enforcers of compliance. By contrast, Faculty B's leadership approach, though well-intentioned, operated at a distance—issuing digital teaching goals but failing to build the pedagogical scaffolding necessary for staff buy-in. This directly answers Research Question 1 and Objective 1: leadership that is relational, visible, and collaborative increases staff commitment to innovation; leadership that is managerialist and transactional inhibits sustainable change [5,12].

The implications of this finding extend to the idea of “leadership literacy” in teaching and learning. Leaders in Faculty A were described as pedagogically fluent—they engaged in discussions not just about platform use, but about assessment reform, cognitive engagement, and learner-centred design. This aligns with Fung, who posits that pedagogical leadership is most impactful when rooted in an understanding of curriculum theory and practice [34]. Without this fluency, as observed in Faculty B, leadership risks being reduced to operational oversight, disconnected from the intellectual work of education.

Structural Conditions and the Distribution of Leadership Agency
Equally significant are the organisational enablers that surround leadership. The contrast between Faculties A and B was not only about leadership style but about the presence (or absence) of institutional mechanisms that support distributed leadership. Faculty A embedded innovation in formal structures—mentoring programmes, workload allowances, peer learning groups—which institutionalised collaborative practice. This reflects literature suggesting that distributed leadership is not merely a cultural preference but a structurally dependent practice [9,17]. Distributed agency only thrives when institutions provide time, recognition, and relational space for it to occur [18,42]. Faculty B, lacking these mechanisms, experienced innovation as fragmented, burdensome,

and short-lived—a point that ties directly to Objective 4 and Research Question 4, which asked how organisational structures support or inhibit sustainable pedagogical change.

These insights also contribute to critiques of neoliberal governance in universities. As Deem and Brehony warned, when teaching innovation is managed via audit cultures and key performance indicators, it becomes performative [25]. Faculty engage in digital adoption not as reflective professionals, but as bureaucratic responders. This finding was echoed in Faculty B, where several respondents described “ticking digital boxes” without pedagogical rationale. Thus, structural conditions matter not only for facilitation but also for resisting superficial change.

Comparing Leadership Logics: Empowerment versus Compliance

A key theme emerging from the case comparison is the different logics of leadership operating within each faculty. Faculty A, under distributed leadership, relied on a logic of empowerment: staff were trusted to initiate change, supported through dialogic processes, and encouraged to connect innovation to their disciplinary identities. This resulted in high engagement with digital pedagogies, deeper curriculum redesign, and stronger collaboration—all evident in both survey data and interview narratives. This affirms the work of Bryman and Kezar & Holcombe, who argue that transformational leadership in universities fosters innovation by stimulating intellectual curiosity and autonomy [11,15].

In contrast, Faculty B enacted a logic of control. Innovation was framed as a top-down mandate, and while some resources were provided, staff felt surveilled rather than supported. This is consistent with Nixon's (2011) concern that managerialism erodes the professional autonomy required for real educational reform. Faculty in this setting viewed innovation as temporary and performative, lacking ownership or alignment with their pedagogical values. This addresses Research Question 2 and Objective 2, highlighting how empowerment-oriented leadership leads to deeper, more authentic engagement with pedagogical innovation, while compliance-oriented leadership results in resistance or surface-level adoption.

Faculty Perception, Trust, and the Symbolic Power of Leadership
Perception of leadership emerged as a critical mediator of innovation outcomes. Interestingly, even in Faculty B—where leadership had articulated a clear strategy—staff reported a disconnect between rhetoric and experience. This reflects a broader insight in educational change literature: that change is interpreted, not simply implemented [3,21]. Faculty judge leadership not only by strategic vision but by consistency of actions, responsiveness to concerns, and symbolic acts that demonstrate respect for pedagogical labour. In Faculty A, such symbolic actions included senior staff teaching alongside junior colleagues, celebrating innovation at formal events, and providing real-time feedback on pilot courses.

This perception gap ties into the broader discussion of leadership legitimacy in higher education. As Bolden et al. (2012) note, leadership in universities is more accepted when it is culturally embedded and co-constructed. Faculty are more likely to follow those whom they see as one of their own—who speak the language of teaching, who recognise the affective dimensions of pedagogical work, and who are present in moments of difficulty. These patterns directly respond to Research Question 3 and Objective 3, showing that faculty perceptions of leadership significantly shape their emotional investment in pedagogical reform.

Pedagogical Identity, Agency, and Professional Reconfiguration Finally, the study reveals important insights about how leadership influences the reconfiguration of faculty identity and agency during pedagogical innovation. In Faculty A, the shift to hybrid teaching was experienced as an opportunity for growth, experimentation, and renewed purpose. Staff described their work in terms of student impact, creativity, and scholarly teaching. This aligns with Kemmis & Smith, who argue that pedagogical innovation must be understood not just as behavioural change, but as professional transformation [23]. Faculty identity, particularly in the context of disciplinary knowledge, plays a central role in how change is interpreted and enacted [19]. Leadership that aligns digital innovation with faculty identity supports not only effectiveness but professional wellbeing.

In Faculty B, by contrast, the shift to hybrid teaching was described as emotionally draining, administratively overwhelming, and epistemologically vague. Staff often reported “going through the motions” and expressed concern about the dilution of disciplinary depth. These findings reinforce the importance of academic agency as a mediator of innovation success [20,22]. Faculty do not simply “adopt” innovation; they negotiate it within the frameworks of their academic identities. Leadership that respects and works with those identities—rather than imposing generic practices—enables innovation that is not only technically sound but intellectually and culturally meaningful.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the pivotal role of academic leadership in shaping the trajectory, authenticity, and sustainability of pedagogical innovation within hybrid university contexts. At a time when digital transformation is accelerating institutional change globally, leadership emerges not merely as an administrative function but as a deeply pedagogical, cultural, and relational act. The comparative analysis between two faculties—one operating under distributed leadership and the other under hierarchical command—has offered critical insights into how leadership logics influence faculty engagement with innovation, curriculum development, and professional identity.

The evidence demonstrates that leadership which is dialogic, participatory, and pedagogically literate fosters not only higher levels of engagement with digital teaching strategies but also deeper curricular reform and stronger collaborative networks. This aligns with Kezar’s claim that transformational change in higher education depends on collective agency and shared meaning-making [5]. When faculty are invited to co-construct innovation agendas, when their disciplinary expertise is respected, and when leadership is embedded within academic communities, pedagogical transformation becomes an enriching professional process rather than a bureaucratic burden [8,34]. Conversely, leadership that imposes externally defined mandates, driven by strategic KPIs or managerial imperatives, risks triggering resistance, surface-level compliance, and long-term disengagement [4,7].

Furthermore, the findings underscore that leadership impact is not simply a matter of interpersonal skill or individual charisma—it is deeply shaped by institutional conditions, recognition frameworks, and cultural narratives. Structures that support distributed responsibility, foster communities of practice, and embed innovation in reward systems create a sustainable ecosystem for pedagogical renewal [17,24]. Without such scaffolding, even well-intentioned leadership efforts remain fragile and transient.

Crucially, this study contributes to growing calls for a reconceptualisation of leadership in higher education—not as the coordination of resources or implementation of strategic plans, but as the facilitation of reflective, ethical, and contextually grounded pedagogical inquiry [12,13]. In the hybrid university, where digital platforms mediate increasingly complex interactions between learners, knowledge, and teaching practices, leadership must evolve as a culturally responsive, epistemologically aware, and educationally ambitious force.

This research affirms that the future of pedagogical innovation lies not in technological adoption alone, but in the cultivation of institutional cultures where leadership and learning are deeply entwined. While further longitudinal and multi-institutional studies are needed to test the generalisability of these findings, this case study offers a compelling argument: sustainable educational change in hybrid universities requires a leadership model that is distributed in structure, transformational in intent, and pedagogical in substance.

Practical Recommendations

- **Establish Distributed Leadership Frameworks to Support Innovation:** Universities should intentionally move beyond hierarchical structures and develop distributed leadership models that empower staff across levels and disciplines. This includes appointing pedagogical leads within departments, forming teaching innovation committees, and encouraging cross-functional collaboration. As supported by Jones et al. and Harris, such distribution fosters ownership, responsiveness, and continuity in pedagogical transformation [9,42].
- **Invest in Ongoing Pedagogical Development, Not Just Technical Training:** While digital fluency is essential, pedagogical literacy in hybrid design is critical for meaningful innovation. Institutions should embed structured educational development programmes that go beyond tool-based workshops, focusing instead on learning design, inclusive pedagogy, and assessment reform. Echoing Goodyear and Nordmann et al., professional learning must be developmental, reflective, and aligned with disciplinary epistemologies [32,33].
- **Align Recognition and Appraisal Systems with Teaching Innovation:** To ensure sustainability, universities must reward and recognise educational innovation in formal career progression and performance evaluations. This includes valuing curriculum design, peer mentoring, and pedagogical research on par with traditional outputs like publications. As recommended by Fung & Gordon, integrating teaching excellence into institutional reward structures is essential to cultural transformation [24].
- **Embed Faculty-Led Innovation into Strategic Planning:** Innovation should not be confined to top-down initiatives or special projects. Faculty-led practices that show promise must be documented, evaluated, and scaled through formal inclusion in learning and teaching strategies. Leadership teams should act as facilitators and amplifiers of ground-level practices, ensuring alignment without stifling contextual diversity [43].
- **Strengthen Pedagogical Communication Channels:** To bridge the gap between institutional discourse and faculty realities, leadership must develop consistent, transparent, and dialogic communication strategies. This includes open forums, co-creation panels, and regular consultation processes that legitimise academic voice and build shared purpose. As noted by Bolden et al. (2012), communicative legitimacy is central to building relational trust in academic contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Longitudinal Studies on Pedagogical Leadership and Innovation Sustainability: Future research should explore how leadership models influence pedagogical innovation over time. Longitudinal case studies could capture how initiatives evolve, embed, or dissipate depending on shifts in leadership style, staff turnover, or institutional priorities.
- Cross-Institutional Comparative Studies in Diverse National Contexts: This study was situated in a UK university context. Comparative research across multiple countries or systems (e.g., the US, EU, Asia) would help identify how cultural, policy, and funding environments mediate the relationship between leadership and faculty innovation.
- Examination of Student Perceptions regarding Pedagogical Innovation: While this study focused on faculty adaptation, future research could investigate how students interpret and respond to leadership-driven teaching innovation. Understanding whether innovations align with learner expectations and enhance engagement remains an important lens for evaluating effectiveness.
- Role of Educational Developers and Middle Leaders in Change Processes: Middle leaders such as programme directors and educational developers often serve as key agents in implementing innovation but are under-researched. Studies examining how they navigate institutional strategy, mediate tensions, and support faculty agency could yield actionable insights.
- Impact of Digitisation on Academic Identity in Hybrid Institutions: Finally, further exploration is needed on how digitisation reshapes what it means to be an academic, particularly in relation to professional identity, community belonging, and scholarly purpose. This could involve ethnographic or narrative inquiry methodologies to capture lived experiences in more depth [44].

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