DIGITAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS IN CHINA: GOVERNING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT
Digital transformation in Chinese higher education has moved from infrastructure provision and resource digitization toward platform integration, artificial intelligence, data-informed administration, and the redesign of teaching, research, and services. This transition increases the responsibility of educational administrators because technological adoption can create educational value only when strategy, academic judgment, organizational capability, ethics, and accountability are aligned. This article examines the digital leadership competencies required of educational administrators in Chinese higher education. It argues that digital leadership should not be understood as technical proficiency alone. Rather, it is an educational and organizational capability through which administrators establish a shared digital vision, mobilize institutional resources, develop staff capacity, guide pedagogical change, and ensure that technological innovation serves educational quality, equity, and public value. The article synthesizes literature on digital transformation, e-leadership, and higher-education leadership to propose five interconnected competency areas: digital, data, and artificial-intelligence knowledge; strategic and managerial skills; pedagogical judgment; relational and change-leadership capacity; and ethical and inclusive competence. It then analyzes the implications of these competencies for educational policy, university governance, organizational management, teachers, students, and technology partners. In the Chinese context, the article contends that administrators must translate national policy ambitions into differentiated institutional strategies that account for variations in resources, institutional missions, disciplinary characteristics, and regional conditions. The article concludes that digital transformation in Chinese higher education will be sustainable only when administrators combine strategic leadership with educational judgment, collaborative capacity, and ethical responsibility.
Keywords: Digital Leadership, Educational Administration, Chinese Higher Education, Digital Governance

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become deeply embedded in the work of higher education institutions. Learning management systems, online and hybrid teaching, digital libraries, student information systems, learning analytics, smart campus infrastructure, cloud services, and generative artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping how universities organize teaching, research, student support, and administration. In addition, digital transformation can be understood as "a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies" (Vial, 2019). In higher education, this process involves more than converting paper documents into digital records or transferring face-to-face lectures to online platforms. It may reshape curriculum design, assessment, academic advising, research collaboration, quality assurance, and the management of institutional data (Benavides et al., 2020), which similarly show that digital transformation in higher education depends on the interaction of technology, organizational strategy, people, culture, and educational processes.

China is an important context for examining digital leadership because the Ministry of Education has progressively developed a national policy framework for educational digitalization. The 2018 Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan established digital technology as a means of promoting educational modernization, improving digital infrastructure, and integrating information technology into teaching and institutional management (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2018). In 2022, the Ministry launched the National Smart Education Platform, creating a centralized system for sharing online courses, teaching materials, and educational services across China (MOE, 2022). By 2023, the platform had expanded substantially and was described by the Ministry as the world's largest education-resource database, providing large-scale access to digital learning resources for teachers, students, and the public (MOE, 2023). The 2025 Digital Education Strategic Action Plan further positioned digital education as a national strategy for strengthening educational quality, innovation, and international competitiveness (MOE, 2025a), while the 2025 Opinions on Accelerating Educational Digitalization emphasized coordinated digital development, lifelong learning, responsible innovation, and the integration of digital technologies into educational reform (MOE, 2025b). Together, these policies create significant opportunities for Chinese universities to expand digital teaching, administration, resource sharing, and AI-supported services. They also increase expectations for educational administrators to translate national priorities into institutionally appropriate practices, allocate resources effectively, support faculty development, protect data, and evaluate digital initiatives according to educational outcomes rather than technology adoption alone. This responsibility is particularly important because technology by itself cannot resolve fragmented systems, uneven faculty participation, ineffective online pedagogy, unequal student access, poor data quality, or uncertainty about the ethical use of AI.

The central problem identified in the literature is not the absence of digital technologies, but the difficulty of converting technological investment into meaningful, coordinated, and educationally beneficial institutional change. Research shows that higher education digital transformation is multidimensional, involving infrastructure, organizational strategy, institutional culture, staff capability, pedagogy, and governance (Benavides et al., 2020). Studies of digital leadership in universities also indicate that the field remains conceptually fragmented and that institutions frequently face weak strategic alignment, insufficient evidence of impact, limited faculty engagement, and inadequate attention to organizational and ethical conditions (Ratajczak, 2022; Ghamrawi & Tamim, 2023). In China, this challenge is particularly significant because administrators must translate national digitalization policies into practices that fit different institutional missions, regional resources, disciplinary needs, and governance arrangements (Jing et al., 2025). Consequently, a university may possess advanced platforms and extensive digital resources while still experiencing fragmented systems, uneven faculty participation, ineffective

online pedagogy, unequal student access, poor data quality, or uncertainty about the responsible use of artificial intelligence. The key issue, therefore, is whether educational administrators possess the leadership capacity and digital competencies required to align technology, people, pedagogy, organizational change, and ethical responsibility with educational purposes (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; OECD, 2023). The difference between technological adoption and meaningful transformation lies largely in leadership. This article argues that governing digital transformation requires two closely connected capacities: digital leadership and digital competencies for educational administrators. Digital leadership concerns the ability to set direction, mobilize people, coordinate change, and sustain an institutional culture that uses technology for educational purposes. Digital competencies provide the knowledge, skills, judgment, and ethical awareness that allow leaders to perform these functions well. The article focuses conceptual academic article rather than an empirical research report. Its purpose is to synthesize relevant literature and propose a coherent framework for understanding the competencies that educational administrators need for the purpose of governing digital transformation.

2. CONCEPTS ABOUT DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Digital transformation should be distinguished from digitization and digitalization. Digitization refers to converting analogue information into digital form, such as scanning records or creating electronic files. Digitalization generally refers to using digital tools to improve existing processes, for example, replacing a manual registration system with an online one. Digital transformation is broader: it involves organizational and cultural change that enables institutions to create new forms of educational value through digital technologies (Vial, 2019).

This distinction is important in higher education. A university may digitalize administrative tasks without changing how it teaches, supports students, or makes decisions. By contrast, transformation may involve redesigning curricula for blended learning, using student data to improve advising, creating flexible access to high-quality resources, supporting cross-institutional teaching collaborations, and revising quality-assurance processes for AI-supported learning. Benavides et al. (2020) emphasize that higher education transformation is multidimensional, involving organizational strategy, infrastructure, institutional culture, pedagogical models, and stakeholder engagement. Thus, digital transformation should be treated as an educational and organizational project, not solely as an information-technology project.

2.1 Digital leadership

Digital leadership has roots in the concept of e-leadership. Avolio et al. (2000) defined e-leadership as a social influence process mediated by advanced information technologies that changes attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and organizational performance. This definition remains useful because it recognizes that technology changes the conditions under which leadership occurs. However, contemporary digital leadership extends beyond leading through online communication. It involves leading organizations that are being reshaped by digital technologies.

Conceptually, it is defined as the organizational competence to steer personnel, transform institutional culture, and orchestrate systemic change within digitally saturated environments. As Cortellazzo et al. (2019) contend, this construct necessitates both the judicious application of technological resources and the cultivation of a unifying strategic direction, while Ehlers (2020) further emphasizes the importance of promoting cross-functional cooperation and reconciling technological adoption with pedagogical imperatives. Diverging from earlier paradigms that were predominantly concerned with technologically mediated interaction, the current scholarly emphasis rests upon the comprehensive restructuring of administrative procedures, strategic planning mechanisms, and instructional frameworks — a shift that signals a maturing recognition

that digitalization transforms institutional identity rather than merely augmenting existing workflows.

When applied to the tertiary education sector, this leadership model imposes specific obligations on institutional administrators to embed these abstract capabilities into tangible operational strategies. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) highlight the necessity of harmonizing digital agendas with academic priorities and facilitating synergy between instructional and technical departments. Extending this line of reasoning, Ehlers (2020) points to the parallel importance of encouraging pedagogical experimentation and provisioning an enabling environment wherein academic personnel can cultivate innovative methodologies. These practical demands, while firmly grounded in the broader digital leadership literature, take on distinctive forms within higher education due to the sector's unique combination of decentralized governance, disciplinary diversity, and long-standing pedagogical traditions.

2.2 Digital competencies for educational administrators

Digital competencies are often discussed in relation to teachers or students. However, educational administrators require a distinct competency profile because they make institutional decisions with consequences for staff, students, data, budgets, and public accountability. Based on the literature, five interconnected competency areas are particularly important.

Educational administrators require an integrated set of digital leadership competencies rather than a collection of isolated technical skills. At the foundational level, they need sufficient knowledge of digital platforms, institutional information systems, data analytics, cloud services, and generative artificial intelligence to evaluate technological possibilities, limitations, interoperability, data quality, algorithmic bias, vendor claims, and evidence of effectiveness (UNESCO, 2023). This knowledge must be combined with strategic and managerial capacity to establish institutional priorities, allocate resources, coordinate implementation, evaluate outcomes, and connect investments in infrastructure with faculty development, pedagogical support, and student services. Research on Chinese university leaders highlights digital strategic foresight, resource coordination, technology awareness, and culture building as important dimensions of digital academic leadership (Jing et al., 2025). Administrators must also exercise pedagogical judgment by evaluating digital initiatives according to their effects on learning, inclusion, feedback, engagement, assessment, and student support rather than relying solely on platform usage or the quantity of online resources. Because digital transformation can generate uncertainty, additional workload, resistance, and unequal levels of confidence among staff, leaders need relational and change-leadership abilities that enable them to communicate purpose, build trust, encourage participation, and support professional learning (Ghamrawi & Tamim, 2023). These competencies must be underpinned by ethical and inclusive judgment concerning privacy, cybersecurity, surveillance, academic integrity, accessibility, digital well-being, algorithmic bias, and unequal access. Taken together, digital leadership competence involves the ability to align technological knowledge, strategic action, pedagogical purpose, human relationships, and ethical responsibility with the educational mission of the university (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; OECD, 2023).

Ethical and inclusive competence is also essential because digital transformation creates risks involving privacy, cybersecurity, data surveillance, academic integrity, accessibility, digital well-being, algorithmic bias, and unequal access. The OECD (2023) emphasizes that digital education requires governance arrangements that build trust, protect personal data, improve interoperability, and promote equity. Administrators should therefore identify and address these risks before technologies are implemented rather than responding only after problems occur. These five competency areas—digital, data, and AI knowledge; strategic and managerial skills; pedagogical judgment; relational and change-leadership capacity; and ethical and inclusive competence—should not be treated as separate abilities. They operate together through digital leadership, which provides direction for institutional change, while the competencies provide the intellectual,

practical, relational, and ethical resources that make leadership credible and effective. An administrator may have a strong digital vision but make poor decisions without sufficient knowledge of pedagogy, data, AI, and risk; similarly, technical knowledge will have limited institutional impact without communication, collaboration, trust, and the ability to mobilize people. The framework proposed in this article therefore understands digital leadership as the integrated enactment of these competencies in pursuit of shared educational purposes (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Ghamrawi & Tamim, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

3. REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

The literature on digital leadership has expanded rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic, moving from earlier concerns with e-leadership and virtual communication toward digital transformation, organizational agility, data-informed decision-making, and artificial-intelligence governance. Although digitalization does not replace conventional leadership, it changes how administrators communicate, coordinate, make decisions, and build trust (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Higher education adds complexity because universities combine academic autonomy, disciplinary diversity, public responsibility, professional norms, and multilayered governance. Ehlers (2020) argues that digital transformation requires leaders to support emergent, networked, and participatory forms of organization, while Ratajczak (2022) identifies digital competence, digital transformation, and leader characteristics as major themes in university research. Existing studies agree that technical expertise alone is insufficient. Ghamrawi and Tamim (2023) show that effective digital leadership also involves culture, differentiation, governance, and advocacy, and Jing et al. (2025) identify strategic foresight, resource coordination, technology awareness, and culture building as important dimensions among Chinese university leaders. The literature further emphasizes faculty development, since teachers need support with digital pedagogy, assessment design, AI literacy, accessibility, intellectual property, and the critical use of educational data. It also highlights the growing importance of data and AI governance: learning analytics and student-information systems may improve advising and planning, but they can also intensify surveillance and overreliance on metrics. Consequently, administrators must consider privacy, security, interoperability, transparency, bias, equity, and the continuing professional role of teachers (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Despite this progress, the literature remains conceptually and methodologically limited. Digital leadership is defined inconsistently, with studies variously emphasizing individual traits, organizational capacity, technology adoption, or digital transformation, making findings difficult to compare (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Ratajczak, 2022; Zhu et al., 2025). Much research relies on self-reported perceptions and therefore provides limited evidence about whether leadership produces sustained improvements in student learning, equity, or institutional performance (Ghamrawi & Tamim, 2023; Ratajczak, 2022). Research has also focused more heavily on schools and Western settings than on higher education systems such as China, where national policy coordination, institutional hierarchy, and diverse university missions shape digital change in distinctive ways (Jing et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025). Furthermore, issues including datafication, commercial vendor dependence, workload intensification, privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias, and unequal access require deeper attention (Benavides et al., 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). These gaps support a balanced framework in which digital leadership is understood as context-sensitive educational judgment: administrators must encourage innovation while exercising restraint, use data while protecting privacy, and pursue efficiency without compromising educational quality, inclusion, or public responsibility.

4. ANALYSIS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

From an educational administration perspective, digital leadership begins with policy interpretation and strategic planning. National policies can provide important direction, but universities differ significantly in mission, location, resources, staff composition, student population, and disciplinary strengths. Administrators must therefore translate broad policy goals into institutional strategies. A research-intensive university may prioritize digital research infrastructures, interdisciplinary AI programs, and advanced analytics, whereas a teaching-oriented or vocational institution may focus more strongly on staff capability, accessible digital resources, and student employability. A single model is unlikely to work equally well across all institutions.

Strategic planning should begin with a digital-readiness assessment. Administrators need to determine the reliability of infrastructure, the level of faculty and student digital capability, the quality of institutional data, the accessibility of platforms, and the degree of alignment between technology initiatives and educational priorities. They should then establish achievable goals. For example, rather than setting a vague target to "become a smart university," an institution might aim to improve first-year student advising, redesign assessment in selected programs, strengthen digital accessibility, or develop a responsible AI-use policy.

Organizational management is also central. Digital transformation requires coordination among academic affairs, IT services, libraries, finance offices, student services, teaching-and-learning centres, legal advisers, and academic departments. When these units work independently, institutions often accumulate incompatible systems and duplicate data entry. Administrators should establish cross-functional structures that include both academic and technical expertise. This does not necessarily require a large new bureaucracy; it requires clear responsibility, regular communication, and transparent decision-making.

Resource allocation is another leadership function. Responsible procurement should be based on educational need, accessibility, cybersecurity, long-term cost, interoperability, vendor support, and evidence of effectiveness. Administrators should avoid adopting platforms solely because they are fashionable or promise rapid modernization. Procurement decisions should also consider whether staff and students can realistically use the technology and whether it creates long-term dependence on a single provider.

Faculty development is perhaps the most important area of implementation. Teachers need sustained support rather than one-time workshops. Administrators can support professional learning through instructional-design teams, peer mentoring, communities of practice, workload recognition, and discipline-sensitive training. They should also involve teachers in the design and evaluation of digital initiatives. This is important because faculty members understand the pedagogical demands of their disciplines and can identify problems that may not be visible in centralized planning.

Students should be treated as active stakeholders rather than passive users of digital systems. Administrators should consider device access, internet connectivity, disability access, language needs, digital well-being, and student concerns about privacy. Although national platforms expand access to resources, equal availability does not necessarily mean equal ability to benefit. Students with fewer devices, weaker connectivity, or lower digital confidence may need additional support. Inclusive leadership therefore requires administrators to monitor participation and outcomes, not just platform access.

Ethical responsibility should be integrated into each stage of decision-making. China's Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law establish an important legal environment for data use (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China [NPC], 2021a, 2021b). University administrators need procedures for data classification, consent, access control, retention, cybersecurity response, and staff training. When AI tools are used, institutions should

provide clear guidance about academic integrity, disclosure of AI use, verification of outputs, and the limits of automated decision-making. Human oversight is essential, particularly when technologies affect student assessment, academic progression, or disciplinary decisions.

5. APPLICATION TO THE CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

China's policy environment gives digital leadership particular significance. The Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan promoted the integration of information technology into educational modernization (MOE, 2018). The establishment of the National Smart Education Platform expanded access to high-quality resources and connected digital education with broader public-service goals (MOE, 2022, 2023). More recent policy documents have reinforced the role of digitalization in building a strong education system and supporting lifelong learning (MOE, 2025a, 2025b; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

These policies create a strong foundation, but they do not remove institutional differences. Universities in major cities may have stronger infrastructure, funding, industry connections, and technical personnel than institutions in less-developed regions. Elite universities may invest in research data, AI laboratories, and advanced digital services, while local universities may prioritize basic infrastructure and faculty development. Administrators should therefore apply the competency framework in context. Digital strategic knowledge may lead one institution to build a sophisticated data environment, while another may appropriately focus on reliable connectivity and accessible teaching platforms.

The Chinese context also highlights the importance of leadership agility. Wu and Yusuf (2026) found that leadership agility among Chinese higher education administrators was positively associated with digital readiness, strategic adaptation, and institutional resilience. Their findings suggest that administrators need the capacity to interpret policy direction, mobilize resources, and revise institutional strategies as conditions change. This is particularly relevant as AI becomes increasingly integrated into education. National efforts to expand AI-related educational applications may create opportunities for personalized learning, administrative efficiency, and new forms of teaching, but they also require careful governance and staff preparation (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2026).

A context-sensitive leadership-development approach is therefore needed. First, universities should provide structured professional development for administrators, including digital strategy, data literacy, AI literacy, pedagogical leadership, cybersecurity, and ethical decision-making. Second, leadership development should involve practical institutional projects, not only lectures. Administrators might work in teams to conduct a readiness audit, design an AI-use policy, improve a student-support process, or evaluate an existing platform. Third, competency development should be differentiated by role. Senior leaders need strategic and policy capacity; deans need academic and faculty-development capacity; department heads need change-management and communication skills; and digital officers need strong technical, organizational, and collaborative competence.

Chinese universities should also create mechanisms for accountability and learning. Evaluation should consider whether digital transformation improves educational quality, student inclusion, staff capability, and institutional resilience. Platform traffic, number of online courses, or the amount of digital equipment may be relevant indicators, but they are not sufficient evidence of educational success. Institutions should combine quantitative data with faculty and student feedback, peer review, and evidence of learning outcomes.

Finally, administrators should maintain a public-value orientation. Digital transformation can improve access and efficiency, but universities are educational institutions rather than technology companies. Their responsibility is to cultivate knowledge, support students, protect academic integrity, and contribute to social development. Digital leadership is strongest when it treats technology as a means to these purposes rather than as an end in itself.

6. CONCLUSION

Digital transformation in Chinese higher education is an educational-administration challenge as much as a technological one. National policy, digital platforms, and AI applications provide major opportunities for institutional modernization, but technology cannot determine educational value on its own. Educational administrators play a decisive role because they interpret policy, define priorities, allocate resources, support faculty, protect students, and build institutional cultures.

This article has argued that digital leadership should be understood as the capacity to guide institutional digital change toward educational quality, equity, and public value. It has proposed five interconnected competency areas for educational administrators: digital, data, and AI knowledge; strategic and managerial skills; pedagogical judgment; relational and change-leadership capacity; and ethical and inclusive competence. These competencies enable administrators to move beyond technology acquisition and toward meaningful institutional transformation.

In China, the framework should be implemented in ways that reflect national priorities while recognizing institutional diversity. Universities need differentiated strategies, cross-functional leadership structures, sustained professional development, responsible data and AI policies, and evaluation systems focused on educational outcomes. Future research should examine how these competencies develop among different groups of administrators and how they influence faculty practice, student learning, equity, and institutional resilience. Ultimately, the quality of digital transformation will depend not on the quantity of technology that universities possess, but on the quality of leadership through which they use it.

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