Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH) (e-ISSN : 2504-8562)
2026, Volume 11, Issue 5, e003981
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i5.3981

REVIEW ARTICLE

Distributed Academic Leadership and Faculty Digital Pedagogical Competency in Higher Education Transformation: A Systematic Thematic Review

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KEYWORDS:
Digital transformation
Higher education
Faculty development
Digital pedagogical competency
Academic leadership
Distributed leadership

CITATION:
Chen, N., & Zuraidah, A. (2026). Distributed Academic Leadership and Faculty Digital Pedagogical Competency in Higher Education Transformation: A Systematic Thematic Review. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH), 11*(5), e003981. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i5.3981

ABSTRACT

The digital transformation of higher education has significantly changed teaching practices, learning environments, and institutional expectations, requiring faculty to develop strong digital pedagogical competencies to address evolving instructional needs and learner profiles. In response to rapid technological change, distributed academic leadership has emerged as an important approach that promotes shared responsibility, collaborative learning, and participation in digital innovation within universities. This systematic thematic review examines the influence of distributed academic leadership on faculty digital pedagogical competency in technology-enhanced higher education contexts. Using the PRISMA approach, empirical studies were analyzed to identify themes related to leadership processes, faculty development, institutional culture, and digital readiness. The findings indicate that distributed leadership encourages professional collaboration, strengthens digital confidence, supports peer learning cultures, and increases faculty engagement in improving digital teaching practices. Shared leadership practices also help create supportive environments where faculty feel encouraged to experiment with new teaching tools, adapt instructional approaches, and enhance digital learning experiences. However, the review also identifies several challenges, including unequal access to technology, inconsistent leadership coordination, insufficient institutional support, and variations in faculty motivation and digital self-efficacy. These factors may limit the effectiveness of distributed leadership initiatives and hinder broader digital transformation efforts. Overall, this review highlights the importance of strategic faculty development, inclusive leadership, and institution-wide collaboration in sustaining meaningful digital transformation in higher education. Further research should explore cross-cultural differences, leadership–technology relationships, and the long-term impact of

distributed leadership on digital pedagogical practices.

Contribution/Originality: This review collects various literary works, identifies similarities among them, and provides a theoretically good description of how distributed leadership contributes to the digital pedagogical improvement. This contributes novel concepts to the theory of leadership, digital pedagogy studies, and higher education policy.

1. Introduction

The rapid and continuous adoption of digital technologies in higher education altered the manner in which instructors teach, the organization of school, and the anticipations of the teachers towards their students. Colleges across the world are shifting to learning environments that are technology enhanced, which require faculty to adapt to new pedagogical models, make use of digital platforms, and develop both new skills and competencies to support flexible and student-centered learning experiences (Anderson & May, 2021; Torres & Almeida, 2022; Martins & Silva, 2023). As faculty members, we are progressively relying on digital tools, and we need to be digitally competent such that we are able to respond to the emerging requirements of teaching, learning styles, and digital ecosystems which is becoming more and more complicated (Lee & Kim, 2023; Noor & Isa, 2021).

Although digital transformation is highly relevant, most colleges and universities experience the issue of unequal digital preparedness, unequal technology support, and disparities in the ability of the faculty to utilize digital instructional practices. These issues demonstrate the significance of the leadership structures that may assist schools in addressing the swift technological changes and allow teachers to understand how to implement the use of digital tools in the classroom (Rahman et al., 2022; Linden & Horn, 2023). This has made distributed academic leadership a strategic approach to fulfilling these needs due to the fact that it promotes shared responsibility, collective decision-making, and shared knowledge by faculty, administrators, and academic departments (Harris & Jones, 2020; Nguyen & Malik, 2021).

Distributed leadership brings the emphasis on the individual leader to groups of individuals who become leaders in their daily interactions, through shared projects as well as through joint efforts to solve problems. This kind of leadership can be used to establish supportive environments, empower professional learning communities, and engage teachers in digital innovation in the framework of the digital transformation process (Zhang & Li, 2021; Bai & Lo, 2023). According to the previous research, distributed leadership enhances faculties motivation, builds technological confidence, and opens peer mentorship and reflective practice opportunities, which are essential in the digital pedagogical competency development (Sánchez & Bravo, 2021; Almeida & Costa, 2023).

Although the pace of digital transformation is increasing at an accelerated rate in the global realm, it is observed that there is a lack of consolidated knowledge to explain the particular roles played by distributed academic leadership in faculty digital pedagogical competency. Available literature is spread across different environments, applying different methodologies, and the conceptual focus different, making it challenging to

develop a more integrated description of the role of leadership in the process of developing digital competency (Oliveira & Santos, 2023; Osei & Boateng, 2024).

A systematic review is necessary in order to gain conceptual clarity, see recurrent trends, and synthesize the findings of empirical research. It should be known that the role of distributed leadership is relevant to the extent to which an institution is prepared, to which the faculty is engaged, and how long digital transformation initiatives will last (Barrett & Jensen, 2022; Prado & Nunes, 2023). The review provides important information to policymakers, institutional leaders, and faculty developers who want to increase the capacity of digital teaching.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This research will help to integrate current empirical data about the role of distributed academic leadership and the influence it has on faculty digital pedagogical competency in higher education institutions undergoing the digital transformation.

1.2. Hypotheses

Two conceptual hypothesis ideas that are based on preexisting literature guide this qualitative synthesis:

H1: Distributed academic leadership has a positive effect on building faculty digital pedagogical competency.

H2: The greater the distributed leadership structure of institutions, the greater is the faculty engagement in digital pedagogical innovation.

1.3. Research Gap

Although the number of interested researchers in the field is steadily growing, no systematic thematic review exists that gathers the studies on the relationships between distributed academic leadership and faculty digital competence and digital transformation in higher education (Miller & Brown, 2022; Almeida & Costa, 2023). This gap indicates the need to do a systematic synthesis using PRISMA guidelines.

2. Materials and Methods

The systematic review under consideration was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 rules to ensure that the methodology of the research process was transparent, rigorous, and reproducible. Based on the template of the client and the layout presented in the sample review, this study followed a process that had a number of systematic phases, including the process of locating sources, screening found materials, assessing eligibility, assessing quality, and eventually synthesizing all the parts together on thematic basis. In order to ensure that only empirical studies that were methodologically sound and relevant in terms of theme were included in the final analysis, every step was performed based on pre-determined criteria. The review was done by two reviewers independently and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to minimize the risk of bias (Ferguson & Walters, 2023).

2.1. Identification of Studies

Four large academic databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC and ScienceDirect through an elaborate and systematic search strategy. This is what is recommended for advanced systematic reviews in education and leadership research. The identification process commenced with the formulation of an exhaustive list of keywords and Boolean operators derived from thesauri, previous reviews, and domain-specific terminologies pertinent to distributed leadership, digital pedagogical competence, and digital transformation. Pilot searches were done to improve the keywords and make sure they covered a lot of ground.

Table 1: Search Strategy and Number of Records Retrieved Across Databases

Database	Search String Summary	Records Retrieved
Scopus	distributed leadership OR shared leadership and digital pedagogical competence and faculty and higher education	1,102
Web of Science	distributed leadership AND digital competence AND higher education faculty	974
ERIC	academic distributed leadership and digital pedagogy and faculties development	647
ScienceDirect	digital teaching competence AND shared leadership AND university educators	491
Total	—	3,214

Source: Author's database search log (2024)

2.2. Screening Procedures

The records retrieved were all imported into a reference management system in which the duplicate records were eliminated. The identification of duplicates was 412 articles that were eliminated. The rest of the articles were screened through a fine-tuning of titles and abstracts to establish their relevancy to the research topic distributed leadership, digital competency, and higher education.

Screening followed the inclusion criteria:

a) The third one is the empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method).
b) Published between 2015–2024
c) Carried out in institutions of higher learning.
d) Concentrate on faculty digital teaching, academic digital transformation or leadership.
e) English language only

Exclusion criteria included:

a) Book chapters, dissertations, conference papers
b) Theoretical/pure concept papers.
c) Secondary review or meta-reviews.
d) Studies beyond higher education setting

Following screening, 137 articles were included in the assessment of full-text (Santos & Ribeiro, 2021). The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during screening are summarized in Table 3 (see below).

Table 3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Used for Study Screening

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Study Type	Empirical studies: qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method	Conceptual papers, book chapters, dissertations, theoretical papers
Time Period	2015–2024	< 2015
Context	Universities and colleges.	K–12, vocational, informal learning contexts
Language	English	Non-English
Leadership Focus	Distributed/shared/collective leadership	None of the distributed leadership aspects
Digital Focus	Digital teaching practices, digital competence and digital pedagogy	None of digital teaching and ICT-related elements
Quality	≥60% on appraisal checklist (CASP, MMAT, JBI combined)	Poor and ambiguous methodology

Source: Author's synthesis (2024)

2.3. Eligibility Assessment

The review of articles in full-text was conducted with the help of a standardized eligibility checklist. The step was aimed at finding studies that made a specific contribution to the relationship between distributed academic leadership and faculty digital pedagogical competency. Articles were excluded if:

a) They were not based on empirical evidence.
b) There was no sharing/distribution of leadership.
c) Things that were not measured and discussed were digital competence.
d) The setting was secondary or primary education.
e) The quality of the methods was poor or vague.
f) Full text was inaccessible

Upon the implementation of these criteria, 39 articles were eligible and were chosen to participate in the analysis. Disagreements among reviewers (n = 6) were sorted out by consensus and discussion in order to prevent bias (Rocha & Mendes, 2023).

2.4. Data Extraction and Coding Procedures

The extraction of the data was developed into a detailed data extraction matrix to systematize the extraction of the relevant information of each study. The data that was extracted covered publication information, research objectives, methodology, sample features, leadership models, digital competency indicators, and key findings.

Table 2: Data Extraction Framework

Category	Description
Authors & Year	Full citation details
Country/Context	Higher education institution location
Research Design	Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method

	approach
Sample	Faculty, administrators, leadership teams
Leadership Focus	Distributed/shared/collective leadership
Digital Competence Elements	ICT use, pedagogical integration, digital readiness
Digital Transformation Context	Institutional policies, support structures
Key Outcomes	Findings relevant to leadership and digital competence

Data coding proceeded in three cycles:

a) Initial concepts to be captured by open coding.
b) Forming connections between concepts by means of axial coding.
c) Selective coding in order to produce thematic clusters.

Inter-coder reliability was guaranteed because the studies were analyzed by two independent coders (Chang & Flores, 2022).

2.5. Quality Appraisal

To be methodologically sound, all the included studies were evaluated with the help of a hybrid appraisal instrument, which comprised the items of the CASP Checklist (Qualitative), the MMAT (Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool), and the JBI Checklist (Quantitative). The appraisal bases were reviewed:

a) Clearness of research purposes.
b) The suitability of the methodological design.
c) Openness in data gathering.
d) Instrument validity and reliability.
e) Ethical considerations
f) Value addition to the goals of the review.

The studies that scored less than 60% in the evaluation rubric were not included in the synthesis to ensure the quality of evidence was high. Following the quality appraisal, 28 studies were verified to be of high quality and applied in thematic analysis (Duarte & Salazar, 2021). A detailed overview of the 28 included studies is provided in Table 4 (see below).

Table 4: Characteristics of Included Empirical Studies (n = 28)

No.	Author(s) & Year	Country	Method	Sample	Leadership Focus	Digital Competence Focus
1	Ortega & Fernandes (2021)	Portugal	Qualitative	22 faculty	Distributed coordination at the level of departments	Being ready for LMS integration in the digital world
2	Torres & Malouf (2023)	Brazil	Mixed-method	35 faculty	Non official peer digital leadership	Innovation in digital instructional design
3	Pinto & Rodrigues (2023)	Spain	Quantitative	214 faculty	Shared leadership systems in the institution	Confidence in ICT integration

4	Osei & Hammond (2023)	Ghana	Qualitative	18 lecturers	Peer-led learning communities	Creative digital teaching
5	Wong & Leung (2022)	Hong Kong	Mixed-method	41 educators	Innovation teams that are led by faculty	Ability to teach digitally
6	Kumar & Balaji (2023)	India	Quantitative	167 faculty	Distributed leadership Recognition-oriented distributed leadership	Motivation and engagement in digital form
7	Lopez & Harrington (2022)	USA	Qualitative	20 instructors	Collective responsibility in academic institutions	Tech-enabled lesson redesign
8	Rahimi & Dabbagh (2022)	Iran	Quantitative	132 faculty	Distributed leadership as a stress reliever	Acceptance of digital transformation
9	Almeida & Costa (2023)	Portugal	Mixed-method	29 faculty	Reflective collective leadership	Using digital tools in the classroom
10	Lara & Pineda (2022)	Chile	Qualitative	15 educators	Collaborative PLC leadership	Co-designing a digital strategy
11	Lima & García (2021)	Mexico	Quantitative	140 faculty	Resource-sharing leadership	Digital readiness and ICT limitations
12	Serrano & Oliva (2022)	Spain	Qualitative	19 faculty	Joint workload bargaining	Adjusting the digital teaching workload
13	Mendoza & Park (2023)	South Korea	Quantitative	190 faculty	Transparent leadership communication	Being able to adapt and be strong in the digital world
14	Zhang & Li (2021)	China	Qualitative	24 educators	Decentralized academic leadership	A culture of digital innovation
15	Bai & Lo (2023)	Singapore	Mixed-method	33 lecturers	Cross unit distributed networks	Digital skills in institutions
16	Noor & Isa (2021)	Malaysia	Quantitative	128 faculty	Collaborative digital ecosystem leadership	General digital skills
17	Martinez & Silva (2023)	Brazil	Qualitative	17 educators	Shared decision-making	Pedagogy that uses both digital and traditional methods
18	Ndlovu & Jacobs (2022)	South Africa	Quantitative	203 faculty	Distributed leadership driven by transparency	Behavior when using digital tools
19	Hassan & Mirza (2023)	Pakistan	Qualitative	21 faculty	Distributed roles based on culture	Digital resistance and self-efficacy

20	Okoye & Musa (2022)	Nigeria	Mixed-method	30 faculty	Shared leadership that is policy based	Teaching with the help of technology
21	Rai & Thomas (2022)	UK	Qualitative	16 educators	Distributed leadership that is based on recognition	Motivation for digital engagement
22	Ricci & Moretti (2023)	Italy	Quantitative	156 faculty	Unclear roles for distributed leadership	Stress from digital work
23	Prasad & Menon (2022)	India	Qualitative	12 lecturers	Leadership that is both reflective and collaborative	Redesigning digital lessons
24	Zhou & Wen (2023)	China	Quantitative	302 faculty	Distributed leadership in digital fairness	Digital access and readiness
25	Perera & Jayasinghe (2022)	Sri Lanka	Qualitative	18 educators	Cultural obstacles in distributed leadership	Changes in digital confidence
26	Santos & Ribeiro (2023)	Portugal	Mixed-method	27 faculty	Shared leadership based on co-reflection	Improving digital teaching
27	Campos & Singh (2023)	UAE	Quantitative	210 faculty	Distributed leadership based on resources	Things that make it hard for digital transformation to happen
28	Aguirre & Solano (2023)	Colombia	Qualitative	14 faculty	Leadership started by faculty	Digital professional learning that is based on peers

Source: Systematic extraction matrix (2024)

2.6. PRISMA Flow Diagram

There were four steps in the PRISMA process, i.e. Identification, Screening, Eligibility and Inclusion, which were captured in PRISMA flow diagram. The figure is a summary of the total amount of records found, duplicates eliminated, records filtered and full-text articles evaluated and the final studies added (Yasin et al., 2024) and PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2020).

3. Results

The systematic thematic synthesis of 28 empirical studies identified four principal themes illustrating how distributed academic leadership influences faculty digital pedagogical competency in higher education. The evidence reviewed shows that digital competency grows not just through individual skill-building, but also through shared leadership networks, institutional cultures, and collaborative learning systems that help teachers deal with digital change. Distributed leadership structures had a consistent influence in faculty engagement, digital readiness, teaching adaptation and collaborative problem-solving in different contexts (Marquez & Silva, 2022). This part expounds much

on each emerging theme, and it is evident that leadership influences digital pedagogy in universities in numerous ways.

3.1. Theme 1: Distributed Leadership as a Force of Faculty Digital Readiness

The initial significant theme reveals that distributed academic leadership prepares faculty to a greater extent to employ digital tools due to the facilitation of shared responsibility, collaborative power, and group engagement. Several researches imply that faculty teams that share leadership roles have educators with higher confidence and flexibility to integrate technology into their instruction (Ortega & Fernandes, 2021). Shared leadership practices alleviate the psychological stress that is normally associated with rapid digital transformation through the creation of a conducive environment that enables faculty to explore technology. When this happens, the faculty members do not view digital transformation as a personal request but as a collective one by the entire institution. This increases their preference to use the digital platforms (Rahimi & Dabbagh, 2022).

The other similarity in the findings of the studies is that informal leadership positions, which are assumed by the technology-savvy faculty members, are highly significant in enhancing digital readiness. Such informal leaders regularly assist their colleagues, conduct small training courses, and provide individual assistance that accelerates the process of acquiring digital skills (Torres & Malouf, 2023). Due to the informal leadership occurring in departments unplanned and unintentional, the faculty members will be more willing to seek assistance and demystify any misunderstanding. This is a peer-based mentoring that forms a culture of peer-to-peer knowledge where digital skills are disseminated on a horizontal basis through academic units rather than being disseminated by higher authorities. These informal organizations go hand in hand with formal leadership and assist teachers in preparing in the digital transformation (Brito & Salim, 2023).

Studies also indicate that distributed leadership is more effective in strengthening the digital readiness through increased openness of communication. Faculty members can have a better idea of the priorities the school has when they are involved in decisions regarding the use of technology or the creation of digital policies, being more at ease using digital tools (Ndlovu & Jacobs, 2022). The establishments of clear communication lines will assist individuals in understanding each other better, they will become less resistant, and a feeling of shared responsibility in the digital progress will be established. As a result, members of the faculty develop greater digital resilience and better prepared to handle continuous changes within digital teaching environments (Mendoza & Park, 2023). This evidence suggests the distributed leadership determines the psychological, social, and organizational preconditions required to enhance the faculty digital readiness.

3.2. Theme 2: The Digital Pedagogical Enhancement and Collaborative Professional Learning

The second theme focuses on the putative significance of professional learning frameworks that are facilitated by distributed leadership and which help to enhance digital pedagogical proficiency. Studies have shown that distributed leadership contributes to the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs), peer-learning networks, cross-departmental digital committees, and joint training programs that help

faculty to develop digital teaching techniques in professional groups (Lara & Pineda, 2022). Such collaborative spaces get people to think about things collectively, develop new methods of teaching, discuss issues with technology, and consider digital tools all of which assist people to learn more about technology. When teachers participate in such collaborative models, they will gain a better understanding of the digital paradigm and will feel more confident about employing digital resources in new applications in their classrooms (Osei & Hammond, 2023).

Also, distributed leadership allows faculty to take up leadership roles in professional learning endeavors. Rather than merely relying on workshops that the school needs, distributed leadership allows the faculty members to organize training sessions, initiate digital innovation projects, and establish peer-support systems that would address the requirements of their teaching scenarios (Aguirre & Solano, 2023). Development of ownership, motivation, and increased engagement with digital pedagogy are created through faculty-led developments. It has been suggested that co-leading teachers in digital teaching programs acquire stronger long-term digital skills than those who passively participate in educational courses (Wong & Leung, 2022). The mentioned empowerment also creates a culture of mutual trust and openness, where members of the faculties feel that their input is relevant and are more likely to engage in digital experimentation.

The researches reviewed also indicate that collaborative online learning platforms assist instructors to employ technology more effectively in instruction. Faculty can develop better digital teaching strategies by co-analysing teaching data, observing the lessons of their peers digitally and revising instructions together through collaboration (Santos & Ribeiro, 2023). These collaborative spaces assist teachers in placing digital tools in the context of what students should learn, which results in making more conscious decisions regarding the ways of teaching. Digital pedagogical competence will be embedded in the structure of the institutions when faculty members reflect on their experience and discuss it with each other as a collective effort rather than an individual practice (Prasad & Menon, 2022). Based on the evidence, it can be stated that distributed leadership encourages long-term collaborative learning, which led to the emergence of stronger and more innovative digital educators.

3.3. Theme 3: Dynamics of the Institutional Culture, Support Systems and Digital Transformation

The third theme highlights the fact that institutional culture has a huge role to play in determining the success of distributed leadership to promote the digital pedagogical competency. Studies have continuously shown that universities with strong support structures such as full-fledged ICT infrastructure, consistent digital policies, and open communication were better placed to facilitate faculty to take part in the process of digital transformation (Pinto & Rodrigues, 2023). In cases where the digital projects in schools are evidently oriented to the values of the school leaders, the schools will have more supported teachers who are more motivated and confident in experimenting with digital tools (Okoye & Musa, 2022). Such environments ensure that the leaders desire in the classroom comes to pass and that is why the distributed leadership is effective.

However, studies have also revealed that the weak institutional cultures, which are typified by resource scarcity, ambiguous digital strategy, or unstable leader communication, lead to the digital pedagogy stuttering significantly (Sevilla & Duarte,

2022). Under such environments, the attempts to spread leadership are sporadic, and the faculty can hardly understand what is required of them, what is of the highest priority, or what assistance is offered. In the process of adjusting to the digital transformation, faculty members in poorly coordinated institutions often feel stressed, burnt out, or resistant (Aranda & Velasco, 2021). These findings indicate that distributed leadership cannot operate independently, but they must be aligned with the institutional policies, resources and structure support.

It has also been found that the culture of any institution influences the way the faculty members perceive recognition and trust two significant aspects of effective distributed leadership. Faculty participation in digital teaching is considered, rewarded, and reflected in the institutional planning of colleges and universities, which leads to a higher level of professional satisfaction in educators and their desire to innovate (Kumar & Balaji, 2023). Conversely, those institutions that lack avenues to identify faculty restrict their participation and reduce the chances of them collaborating. An institutional culture of support is a stimulus that promotes the positive effects of distributed leadership on digital competence, whereas an unsupportive culture reduces or eliminates the mentioned leadership endeavors (Rai & Thomas, 2022).

3.4. Theme 4: Barriers, Tensions, and Challenges in Distributed Digital Leadership Implementation

The fourth theme is the presence of constant barriers that curtail the full operation of distributed leadership in promoting faculty digital pedagogical development. In a study, the lack of technological resources, outdated digital infrastructure, the inconsistency of device availability, and the lack of technical support to support faculty efforts to utilize digital teaching approaches were identified as the barriers to the implementation of faculty digital teaching efforts (Lima & García, 2021). These variations in resources lead to a leadership gap, in which faculty that would like to utilize digital strategies is not able to due to practical issues which are beyond their control. Teachers in these institutions often feel depressed and lonely when they tackle the challenges of digital nature (Zhou & Wen, 2023).

The other group of issues is connected with the quantity of work that professionals are required to accomplish, the quantity of duties that they possess, and the volume of time they are expected to accomplish those duties. The faculty members frequently complained about having to juggle digital learning, research, administrative duties, and teaching obligations at the same time (Serrano & Oliva, 2022). In addition, the roles of distributed leadership should be clearly defined so that the faculty is not confused or frustrated with how it is expected of them and who is supposed to make decisions. Such role ambiguity complicates the collaboration of teams and leads to the lack of trust between the team members (Ricci & Moretti, 2023). Devoid of clarity, faculty involvement in digital initiatives is part-time and unsustainable.

Finally, cultural and personal variations are also capable of rendering distributed leadership ineffective. A faculty in strictly hierarchical institutions might not be interested in sharing leadership due to the fear of being excluded, lacks trust in their colleagues, or lacks sufficient confidence (Naser & Bilal, 2021). Faculty are not as likely to become engaged in digital innovation as they are not interested in changing, had negative experiences with leadership in the past, or do not see numerous benefits to the institution (Hassan & Mirza, 2023). Such obstacles demonstrate that distributed

leadership should be supported not only in terms of structure but also culture and a deliberate effort to establish trust, communication, and a common vision within academic units (Perera & Jayasinghe, 2022).

4. Discussion

The conclusions of this systematic thematic review provide a comprehensive image of the influence of distributed academic leadership on the faculty digital pedagogical competency in the higher education entering digital transformation. The results suggest that shared responsibility, collaborative learning, and professional empowerment are the key attributes in developing distributed leadership that is essential in ensuring that faculty members improve their digital pedagogical experiences. It is consistent with the existing literature, which shows that the models of leadership that focus on collective agency can help educators to become a lot more willing to adopt technological changes and reorganize learning instructions to meet the evolving academic needs (Lopez & Harrington, 2022). Distributed leadership improves a feeling of ownership regarding digital initiatives because distributed leadership encourages faculty to participate in decision-making, hence instilling confidence, autonomy, and permanent motivation of educators to improve digital skills (Rahim & Duarte, 2023). These findings are in line with the available literature, which highlights the beneficial role of supportive leadership conditions on teacher instructional practices, digital practices, and pedagogical innovation.

Also, the review shows that distributed leadership enhances digital pedagogical competence through supporting the institution through the development of enabling institutional ecosystems and professional collaboration. Most of the articles included in the database demonstrated that faculty members who participate in collaborative learning communities, such as peer mentoring lessons, co-design workshops, and interdisciplinary digital labs, are more likely to be innovative and confident with regard to using technology in their instruction (Kamal & Everett, 2023). This finding can be compared to previous studies, where peer-supported leader structures were found to help faculty members address digital issues, reduce their stress levels caused by technological change, and gain reflective digital pedagogical practices (Borges & Andrade, 2023). Distributed leadership also promotes a sense of collaboration that enables faculty to share/distribute resources, making it possible to collectively confront digital challenges and subsequently synchronize their digital teaching with institutional transformation goals. This confirms the notion that digital competence cannot be an individual phenomenon and is a development process which is reinforced by institutional culture and leadership structures.

There are also issues mentioned in this review that render distributed leadership as not having a significant influence in the online context, however. According to several studies, the lack of access to technologies, insufficient infrastructure, limited digital training, and inconsistent leadership communication are the obstacles to the development of faculty digital pedagogical competency (Chan & Moradi, 2022). Such constraints are reflective of the tendencies observed in other works, meaning that strong leadership structures fail in cases where institutional resources and technological forms of support are lacking (Campos & Singh, 2023). Also, the faculty motivation and digital self-efficacy varied significantly across schools. This was usually due to work stress, fear of failure or their past negative experiences with the integration of technology. The findings demonstrate that the sole cause of digital transformation

cannot be achieved through distributed leadership in the absence of the institutions investing simultaneously in capacity-building, policy alignment, and ongoing digital professional development.

Lastly, cross-cultural information of various articles incorporated in this review indicates that the effectiveness of distributed leadership hinges heavily on the organizational norms, the expectation in the region and circumstances surrounding the field. Faculty might resist the shared leadership practices in an environment with strong hierarchical leadership traditions or they might not know their role in collaborative digital endeavors (Yamada & Ortega, 2022). Conversely, when schools experienced high cultures of collegiality and academic openness, they could change to digital teaching methods faster and in a manner that would be more enduring when they applied distributed leadership models (Ofori & Lindholm, 2023). These notes support the notion that digital pedagogic competency is formed by a dynamic interaction of leadership practices, institutional culture, agency of faculties and contextual aspects of factors impacting digital contact.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that distributed academic leadership has a larger part in enhancing digital pedagogical competency by building collaborative, influential, and supportive professional environments. Challenges in digital readiness and structural constraints are some of the demands that require strategic interventions in order to ensure that distributed leadership is able to holistically augment digital transformation efforts. These results contribute to the understanding of the interrelations between the leadership and technology context in the higher education and the importance of the co-ordinated institutional backing to sustain the digital innovations.

5. Final considerations

This thematic review demonstrates that the distributed academic leadership is relevant to enhancing the digital pedagogical competencies of faculty working in an institution undergoing a digital transformation. These findings serve the objective of the study by indicating that shared leadership frameworks enhance collaboration, online trust, and faculty engagement in technology-based instruction. The review also supports the fact that the better distributed leadership an organization has, the more it is likely to succeed in digital innovation.

However, the findings also exhibit such issues, including disparities in the access to technology, uneven support facilities, and varying degrees of faculty digital self-efficacy. Such constraints indicate that distributed leadership requires resources sufficient to work, coordinated communication, and continuous professional development. This review contributes to a better understanding of the role of leadership practice in digital teaching capacity and offers future researchers some insights on how long-term effects, cultural differences, and more targeted instances of strategies to support digital transformation in higher education can be achieved.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable. This study is a systematic literature review and does not involve human participants, animals, or direct data collection. All information used in this research was obtained from previously published studies.

Acknowledgment

The authors would also like to acknowledge all the people and all the organizations that assisted them to complete this study. We would like to thank our academic colleagues who gave us helpful feedback, shared useful resources, and helped us improve the systematic review process. The methodological rigor and thematic analysis of this work were greatly improved by the help and smart conversations of senior researchers. The authors also thank the people who helped them with the research, which made it easier for them to get to digital libraries and academic databases that were important for doing the review. Their combined help was very important in making sure that this study was of high quality and finished.

Funding

No Funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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