

How can people power your university's digital transformation?

A Humans@center approach that inspires and embraces the opinions of your people can improve your transformation success



The better the question. The better the answer.
The better the world works.

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Foreword





Universities around the world are pursuing digital transformation. But many higher education (HE) technology initiatives are struggling to keep up with the expectations of students and staff.

Our recent research among more than 3,000 students around the world found that a third are less than happy with their choice of university. As described in our previous paper, [Is your university's transformation centered on tech or people?](#), digital learning is a key pain point, with students calling for teaching faculty to receive additional training to create and deliver learning more effectively using digital technologies.

The research, which included focus groups with hundreds of faculty and professional staff, also revealed a workforce that feels increasingly overworked and overwhelmed. To deliver more value to students and their university, staff desperately need more time, better tools and quality data. Yet many people report that current digital implementation tactics are making their lives harder, as universities are not taking a human-centered approach to these changes.

To find out how the HE sector can get better outcomes from its digital transformation efforts, EY worked with Times Higher Education (THE) to conduct online discussion groups with members of professional staff and teaching faculty in Australia and New Zealand, Canada, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, the UK and Ireland, and the US. In addition, EY teams interviewed 28 university leaders across these countries.

We asked people about the realities of digital transformation in the context of six previously identified “Humans@Center” transformation success factors (see overleaf), discussing how well their university was doing against each of them.

Based on this lived experience, the advice of university leaders and our own engagement with HE transformation, this follow-up paper offers practical advice on how HE leaders can strengthen each element in their institutions. We hope its ideas become a springboard for digital transformation success across the sector.

A successful transformation puts Humans@Center

In 2022, a cross-industry study by EY and the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School found that organizations putting humans at the center of their transformation efforts are two to three times more likely to succeed than those that don't. The study concluded that, beyond investing in the right technology, the emotional journey is essential to a transformation's success.

To identify which transformation practices drive success, the cross-industry study asked respondents to self-assess the extent to which their organization adopted 50 leading practices in 11 areas and the degree of transformation success.

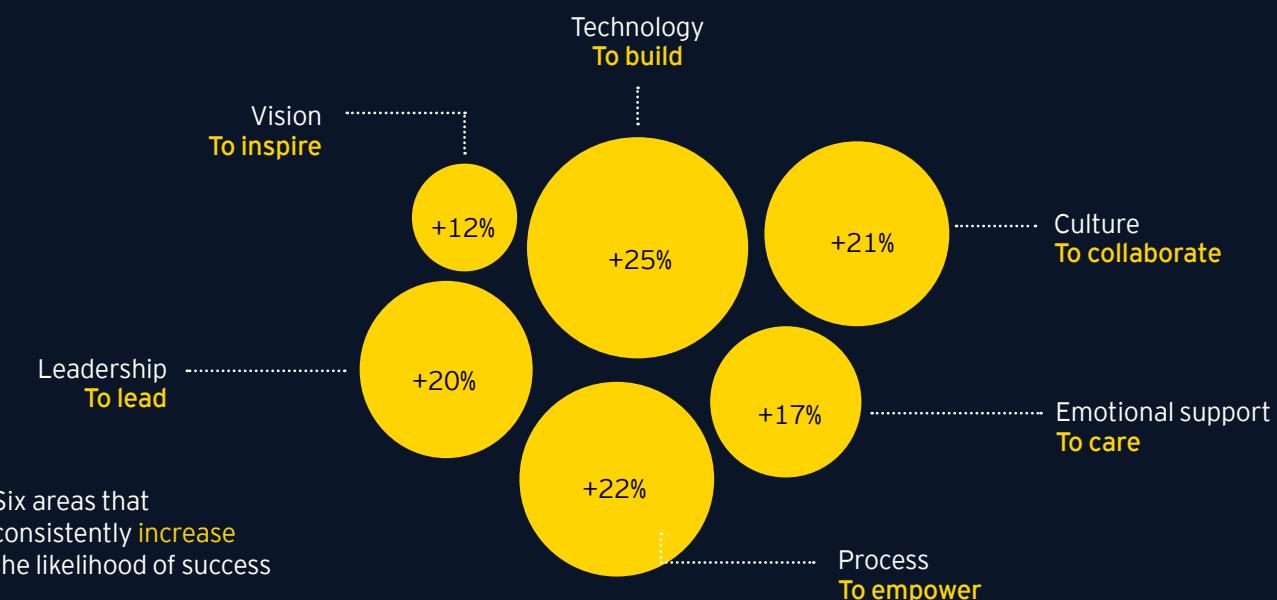
Using predictive modeling, the research team identified six areas with a statistically significant and positive impact on the likelihood of a transformation succeeding:

- 1. Lead:** adapting and nurturing the necessary leadership skills
- 2. Inspire:** creating a vision that everyone can believe in
- 3. Care:** building a culture where people's opinions are embraced and encouraged
- 4. Empower:** setting clear responsibilities and being prepared for change
- 5. Build:** using technology and capabilities to drive visible action
- 6. Collaborate:** finding the best ways to connect and co-create

The research found that having one or two of these practices in play is not enough. But when all these elements are done well, the likelihood of transformation success is 2.6 times higher – increasing from a 28% success rate for transformations with below average adoption in all six areas to a 73% success rate for transformations with above average adoption.

A predictive model identified the six key areas that contribute most to a successful transformation^{1,2}

One standard deviation improvement in each area will increase the average likelihood of success by the percentage shown.



Source: EY and University of Oxford Saïd Business School, "The Future of Transformation is Human" October 2022.

¹ Logistic regression using maximum likelihood estimates; n=2,050.

² Improvement in likelihood of success is an average based on odds-ratios. Only showing areas with a statistically significant increase in transformation success.

The unique nature of transformation in higher education

Universities are pouring time, money and energy into digital transformation. Yet in many cases, progress has been slow. And, in our interviews, we heard that this kind of transformation can be hard and painful for those implementing or impacted by it.

At one level, this is surprising because HE has certain transformation levers in its gift. By nature, universities are learning organizations, with a culture of debate and experimental thinking. And they are purpose-led, with most people genuinely wanting to do their best for students or for the furtherment of knowledge.

However, when it comes to driving change, the traditional collegiate model of universities can be a sticking point. Many institutions have fragmented and siloed structures. Individual faculties can operate as small fiefdoms, resistant to strategies that require centralization or even coordination of efforts across departmental divides. Also, one of the great strengths of universities is that

they value academic freedom and free intellectual inquiry. These same qualities can also lead to some level of skepticism about centrally imposed control or change.

Also, both teaching faculty and professional staff who lived through huge upheaval and made superhuman efforts to keep the university running during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be suffering from change fatigue. In some geographies, large numbers of staff have also moved from tenured positions to casual contracts, potentially damaging institutional loyalty or trust in leadership.

As a result, despite the best efforts of leaders, the structure and nature of the university workforce are pulling some people in different directions – and isolating others. In this environment, it can be hard to generate consistent organizational support for transformation.

Digital transformation needs a fundamentally different approach

Leading a university's digital transformation goes beyond asking a busy workforce to learn to use new

tools and systems. Success depends on fundamentally changing teaching and ways of working. This means convincing people to step out of their comfort zones and into a brave new world. Some people in universities are at the forefront of digital change – but not all. In a workforce that may well include five generations, digital sophistication and comfort can vary greatly.

A successful HE digital transformation hinges on achieving buy-in and activation from both faculty and professional staff – and uptake from students. As universities build their digital campuses, leaders must inspire and enable a diverse workforce to enthusiastically embrace new technologies, new practices and new modes of working.

As our original Humans@Center research described on p6 shows, this type of leadership involves creating a vision – a compelling narrative based on clearly articulated benefits – shared by every faculty or department head. It requires leaders to build a social movement of change, recognizing and proactively addressing the emotional impacts these changes will have on those affected. And it rests on quickly and demonstrably showing progress, convincing people that the change they are being asked to support will be positive and powerful – keeping the change momentum going.

The following sections show how university leaders can develop and adopt these leading practices to make their digital transformations work for students, faculty and professional staff.

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Universities are very unused to change—unlike in a commercial organisation, where change happens annually or even quarterly and people just have a ‘muscle memory’ for change.

Dr. Gerard Culley, Director of IT Services, University College Cork, Ireland

Six elements of transformation success





Inspire
Creating a vision for all to believe in

Empower
Setting clear responsibilities and being prepared for change

Collaborate
Finding the best ways to connect and co-create

1

2

3

4

5

6

Lead

Adapting and nurturing the necessary leadership skills

Care

Building a culture where people's opinions are embraced and encouraged

Build

Using the technology and capabilities to drive visible action

1

Chapter



Lead

Adapting and nurturing the necessary leadership skills

Both studies found that leadership is the single most important factor contributing to a transformation's outcome — good or bad.

In the 2022 cross-industry research carried out with the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School, corporate leaders were happy to take credit for transformation success, but they didn't always want to take responsibility for failure. These executives ranked their own leadership performance as the No. 1 factor in a transformation that delivered. Yet, when transformations underperformed, leaders ranked their input only 10th in the list of possible reasons for failure. By contrast, people in the workforce ranked leadership as the top reason their organization's transformation had either succeeded or failed.

In our 2023 HE research, university leaders and their faculty and professional staff were very clear that leadership is absolutely critical to the success of digital transformation in their institution. Staff agreed that clear direction-setting from the top is crucial, as is ongoing sponsorship and support to ensure that adequate funding and resources are made available and to gain buy-in from across the organization. Senior leadership accountability for digital transformation was also mentioned as a key factor. Accountability for transformation success cannot be delegated to an IT function or a teaching and learning unit.

Common characteristics of leaders presiding over value-creating transformations

<p>2022</p> <p>Cross-industry study EY and the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School</p> <p>Respondents involved in successful change initiatives said their executives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make decisions that are best for the whole organization – not just their areas of responsibility ▶ Understand the needs and views of staff ▶ Accept ideas from more junior personnel 	<p>2023</p> <p>HE study EY and THE</p> <p>Respondents said the best leaders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Have a positive, future-oriented outlook ▶ View technology as a critical enabler of the future vision for the university ▶ Are progressive and ready to champion innovative and potentially risky initiatives ▶ Have an inspirational personality and leadership style 	<p>“</p> <p>You have to have a strong leader, and that is our Vice President for Learning and Teaching, who is amazing. It doesn't happen often that you have someone senior who is so clued up and collaborative but has the knowledge and ability to bring it all together, own it and make decisions.</p> <p>UK and Ireland faculty focus group</p>
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Concerns about HE transformation leadership

Some focus group participants felt that digital transformation lacked a holistic, unified approach and that decision-making was too slow. Several people complained about the disruptive impact of relatively short tenures of people at the top, meaning that digital strategies were not seen through to conclusion, but redirected with each new entrant. Some mentioned that governance, in terms of who was leading the digital transformation, was unclear.

People also felt that the success of individual initiatives depended on who was leading the project and the degree to which they took business needs into account. There was a perception that

some leaders were too far removed from day-to-day requirements to appreciate what was needed or were motivated by the “wrong things.” A few participants said it was hard to explain the pros and cons of different tools to leaders who lacked a real understanding of the technology.

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Leadership needs to lead, rather than encouraging scattergun approaches and lack of holistic thinking.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group

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Plans are not being seen through to conclusion—senior staff come in, make plans, leave after a few years without them being concluded, somebody else comes in and starts new plans.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group



How to lean into your transformation

In traditional universities, institutional silos are entrenched and protectively guarded, meaning leaders hoping to achieve institution-wide transformation must lean in even more deliberately than in other sectors. Leaders must be prepared to:

► **Get all heads of faculties and departments ready to lead the change.** Real digital transformation is a whole of university endeavor, requiring leadership from the heads of all faculties and departments. Not all staff or leaders will support transformation. Even one dissenting or apathetic head of faculty can derail a digital transformation. So, earning the buy-in from faculty heads and understanding and addressing their concerns is vital. As is upskilling transformation leaders. While faculty heads have superlative academic records and standing, they may not be imbued with the technical fluency required to lead successful transformations – or sufficiently versed in (or convinced about) the

merits of digital pedagogy, for example. Heads of academic units are also a vital part of the transformation leadership team. Because these leaders tend to be closer to end users, they have a better understanding of student and staff needs and expectations. But they may lack the skills and experience to effectively manage transformation at the departmental level, and may feel “out of their comfort zone” in being asked to do so for technology projects. Moreover, they may not have deep experience of mobilizing social change.

► **Transform at a personal level.** Leaders who drive successful transformations are self-aware and attuned to the feelings and expectations of themselves, their students and the workforce. They need to constantly work on themselves to deepen self-understanding so they can help to manage the negative emotions bubbling up in the university workforce during intense periods of change and uncertainty.

► **Learn and adopt lessons learned.** Leaders should be open to adjusting the transformation blueprint when necessary, allowing vision and execution to evolve together. To achieve this, leaders must be comfortable to inhabit a place of “not knowing” – and have the humility to admit they don’t know everything. This will take courage in a community of experts, where academics are used to challenging perceived wisdom and seeking proof. Testing ideas, seeking early feedback and adjusting approaches where necessary will go a long way to gaining trust.

► **Acquire digital fluency.** Leaders do not need to be digital experts, but they do need to have a general understanding of what’s possible – now and in the near future – and the related opportunities and risks. While they don’t need to understand how the technology works, the key is to understand what it can and cannot do and be able to articulate the benefits. One important area of understanding is how to optimize productivity across people and technology. As technologies such as generative AI (GenAI) evolve, they will reduce the administrative burden, freeing people to perform more valuable work. Leaders must have a clear view of this progression and ensure capability plans incorporate the human and machine skills needed for faculty and professional staff to get the most value out of digital transformation.

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Success as a leader means creating other leaders. You have to be able to trust that ... all of your people will make the right decisions when you’re not in the room. That involves having a really clear vision and mission ... focused on doing the right thing, which everyone can unite behind.

Dr. Paul LeBlanc, President, Southern New Hampshire University, US

Leaders will therefore need to build their own digital maturity as well as that of their senior team.

- ▶ **Demonstrate courage, curiosity and care.** Leaders require the courage to challenge the status quo, the curiosity to understand another's perspective, and the care to listen and understand the fear and anxiety that a transformation might surface. Engaging with and listening to all parts of the institution and its various stakeholder groups is critical to understanding the potential practical and emotional impacts the transformation may have.

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Understanding yourself isn't sufficient ... dialogue requires that you understand your counterpart. Dialogue is an approach in which you seek mutual understanding, cooperation and better outcomes.

Prof. Yasushi Asami, Professor, The University of Tokyo, Japan

- ▶ **Select the right team.** Leaders must be prepared to put the right people in the right roles based on their skills, ability to learn and willingness to embrace change. That means being realistic about which faculty and department heads will succeed as champions of change and who will need to be brought into the fold. Ensuring adequate representation across the organization will be important to garner institution-wide ownership.

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You need a team who are not only capable, but also who have the right innovation mindset.

Jason Cowie, CIO, Curtin University, Australia





Inspire

Creating a vision for all to believe in

Both studies identified having a clear vision as a foundational element of a successful digital transformation.

In our 2022 cross-industry study, respondents in high-performing transformations were more likely to say that leadership clearly articulated the rationale driving the change and were open to being challenged. In these organizations, more people said the vision was clear and compelling, inspiring them to go the extra mile to support change programs. Importantly, leadership was united on how to achieve the vision and strategy.

In our 2023 HE study, discussions repeatedly touched on the importance of leaders being able to tell a consistent and compelling story. Such narratives should focus on the intended purpose and expected benefits of the transformation for the university's mission, people and students, rather than on the technology itself. Some of the

universities we spoke to had bold, clear visions with well-aligned digital transformation activities. Visions often converged on teaching or research excellence, or on improving equity of access and learning outcomes. For example, some institutions are focusing on using digital technologies to create better learning pathways for people who are marginalized or come into HE from unconventional backgrounds. However, for some of the universities we spoke to, that vision, and how the adoption of digital technologies would support it, was not so clear.

Staff in our focus groups felt that the president or vice chancellor needs to set the vision, create the imperative for change and ensure it is supported with investment and commitment from the senior team and wider staff.

Ideas for communicating a digital transformation vision

When it comes to conveying a future vision, clear, strategic communication not only helps people to understand and embrace the vision but also gives the institution a meaningful vocabulary for talking about change. People in our interviews and focus groups favored ongoing and engaging communications around the vision, through a variety of creative channels – not just a one-off 100-page report. High-impact multimedia campaigns, using first-person narratives where university staff and students help to tell the story, are ideal.

How universities kept their vision front of mind

- ▶ Curtin University, Australia, developed eight infographics that formed a continuous story of the transformation roadmap, and put posters of them all around the campus.
- ▶ At Arizona State University, US, the ASU Charter is everywhere you look on campus, as well as references to all the accolades the university has received.
- ▶ At Southern New Hampshire University, US, on every office wall, there are signs that say: "Are the decisions we make today good for our students?"
- ▶ Falmouth University, UK, (a university for creative arts) created a short video with staff members showing how their lives had changed two to three years in the future. They also carefully branded all communications about the digital transformation with the name of the initiative.

Concerns about HE vision and digital strategy

Some focus group participants felt that their university's vision and digital strategy were either lacking (perhaps because leadership was still "figuring it out") or not communicated effectively or sufficiently widely. Some said that individual initiatives were communicated well, but it was unclear how those actions supported the vision.

Concerns were raised about digital strategies being communicated in a way that tried to scare staff into accepting change. People didn't like it when changes were imposed on them; they would prefer to be consulted and involved.

Some felt that overall strategies were too vague, too abstract and not linked to specific change initiatives. In other cases, staff felt that descriptions of change in the transformation communications were being kept deliberately minimal to avoid pushback. Some complained about the use of buzzwords or overly technical descriptions that people did not understand and could not relate to. Often, the missing pieces were: What will happen in my part of the university to make it real? What does it mean for me in my day-to-day work?

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They put out vague values-related strategies with poor comms and no real link to contextualize to people's day-to-day experiences, so staff can understand, engage, support and contribute.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group

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I wish it [the digital strategy] was communicated. It is only communicated to a few people who work in the university, but not to all the teachers.

India faculty focus group

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There's a lot of buzzwords in the sector, and communication is often restricted to these kinds of terms, which don't always land with staff on the ground.

Canada professional staff focus group

How to be the fire that ignites change

Transformation begins with leaders forming and communicating a clear vision – and articulating the path to achieve it.

To inspire people, a vision should be bold, ambitious and future-oriented, translating into a compelling, emotional “why” that faculty and professional staff can believe in and support.

Creating a clear and detailed roadmap for what needs to change to achieve the vision is also critical. A well-planned and articulated digital transformation strategy and roadmap should then explicitly link proposed activities to how they support the overall vision. For people to believe

in a vision and support the change required to achieve it, they must also believe the university’s leaders have a credible transformation roadmap.

Create a simple, bold and compelling vision

Taking a scenario-based approach to vision and strategy development can help university leaders think boldly about their possible futures. Together, the transformation leadership team sets a clear vision of where the institution wants to be in the future, and how business and operating models need to change, so the university can figure out the roadmap to get there by working backward.

Scenario planning can help leaders to consider how HE is being disrupted and build a picture of a university that will succeed in a potential future 10 years down the track. That picture might describe, for example: the types of students who might choose them; how and what those students will learn; how their choices and behaviors will be influenced by technology or the future demands of the workplace; and what a day in their life might look like.

The future vision needs to be sufficiently radical to “leapfrog transformation” – to propel the university into a leadership position. Otherwise, if the university is only modernizing to play catch-up, it will soon be left behind again.

The leapfrog path should take institutions from “doing digital” to “being digital”



Get everyone aligned around one central vision and strategy

In many ways, inspiring a university workforce to unite behind a purpose-driven vision and strategy should be relatively easy. Universities have the advantage of already being purpose-driven. For many academics and researchers, work is a calling – not a job. Professional staff are also often drawn to work in the sector by personal values. Compared with a corporate workforce, university staff can be easily inspired.

However, the sector is challenged by entrenched compartmentalization and, on some campuses, growing cynicism, due to previous ill-conceived, poorly executed or underfunded plans.

Achieving alignment around an institution-wide vision can be a struggle in siloed institutions where faculties are used to a high degree of autonomy. True transformation is almost impossible to achieve if

individual faculties have their own vision. For some universities, a critical first step is overcoming reluctance to commit to a central strategy.

Communicate the vision and strategy

Once the vision is agreed, creating a clear and detailed plan for what needs to change to achieve the vision is critical. And this needs to be communicated widely. People need to understand the new human experiences, digital operations and business model the university is working toward – and how it will get there.

Leaders may have to overcome the cynicism of an exhausted and overwhelmed workforce, some of whom are now casual workers. People whose experience of previous digital initiatives may not have been positive, where promises have been made but not kept.

For these cohorts especially, visions and strategies must be believable: compelling and engaging, but also pragmatic. The strategy needs to speak to staff priorities and clearly explain the benefits the change will bring. Communication should focus on what needs to change, when and why – and how people will be supported – with ideas articulated clearly and simply. People must quickly understand what the change means for them and how it will make the lives of students, faculty and administrators better.

Show how the digital transformation touches people

The focus must always come back to what the digital transformation will deliver for the humans at the center of universities. How will the digital future benefit students, faculty and professional staff and the future viability of the institution itself? Our previous report describes the issues different cohorts need digital transformation to solve.

The issues different cohorts need digital transformation to solve

Students	Teaching faculty	Researchers	Professional services staff
#convince me to enroll by showing me I belong, simplifying discovery and enrolment, and offering career-oriented programs.	#empower me with evidence, training and support to deliver world-class digital or blended learning.	#equip me with the tools I need to conduct world-class research.	#show me the data I need to do my job better and faster.
#teach me effectively, using digital technology and high-quality teaching experiences.	#free me to devote more time to teaching.	#connect me with my research community.	#free me from busy work so I can focus on more value-add activities.
#support me to succeed by providing personalized learning support and streamlined services.	#enlighten me with the data I need to improve learning outcomes for my students.	#focus me on work that matters by removing the burden of research administration.	

Source: EY, "Is your university's transformation centered on tech or people?," November 2023.

Clearly, universities have limits to their budgets and bandwidth for change initiatives. So it is crucial that leadership prioritizes what the transformation needs to deliver, rather than funding a plethora of initiatives with no unifying goal. University leaders need to agree on which of these four cohorts will be their primary areas of focus and what are their main objectives, so they can prioritize where to invest their limited resources.

Let people have their say

Although leaders must set the vision, digital transformation cannot be imposed from the top down. Once leaders have a sense of the institution's direction of travel, it's time to bring in others.

This is not just about helping people understand why change is needed and inspiring them with a vision of a different future. It's also about listening to people's needs and concerns, involving them in decision-making, and helping them understand

the complexities and conundrums the transformation must overcome and the trade-offs that must be made.

Crafting the details of a transformation's strategy and roadmap should therefore be a very inclusive process. The key is to constantly engage, listen and adapt. The launch of a vision and strategy should never be a surprise, but an anticipated announcement of an already endorsed idea – ideally, where people can see how their input has helped to shape the overall strategy.



Inspiring and educating with a virtual study tour

Before setting out to share a digital vision and craft a strategy and roadmap, we recommend universities prime their workforce with a “virtual study tour.” These immersive sessions, held over one or two weeks, let staff hear from, and ask questions to, thought leaders, industry experts and futurists who bring along their battle scars and learnings from digital transformation projects around the world – in HE and other sectors.

In a virtual study tour, 60-minute virtual sessions broaden people’s horizons about the “art of the possible.” Half the time is spent with presentations from guest speakers. The other half is for Q&A and a debrief. The type of questions tackled might include:

- ▶ What does our university want to be? Who and what do we stand for?
- ▶ What will effective digital learning look like in our university from a student’s perspective?
- ▶ How will artificial intelligence (AI) transform our campus experience

for staff and students – and how would that work?

- ▶ How can we use predictive analytics to create better student outcomes?
- ▶ How can we use data to better connect with industry to improve employability outcomes for our students?
- ▶ What would it look like if we had a platform to help university staff grow and excel in a digital world?
- ▶ What lessons can we learn from other sectors, such as financial services, where businesses have recast their business models?



These sessions can also be used to help people understand the trade-offs that need to be made, given that the university doesn't have endless funds. Once people have a rough idea of how much technology costs, they gain a better appreciation of the conflicting requirements and a clearer understanding of what the transformation will require.

Co-creating a transformation roadmap

Once the vision and art-of-the-possible are understood, the whole

university workforce can be brought together in a multiday, interactive, large-group session to co-design a transformation approach that will have enough buy-in to have a meaningful impact. The aim is to arrive at a clear picture of what the transformation looks like that most of the organization has signed up to.

In these sessions, leaders present the vision of where the university intends to go, and groups of experienced facilitators (often a mix of external experts and skilled-up internal influencers) pre-empt potential tension points and

challenge stereotypes and myths in a psychologically safe environment.

Typically, people arrive at these events uncertain, questioning, confused, anxious or hostile. All stakeholders are therefore given multiple opportunities (both public and private) to voice their doubts and anxieties. Their concerns can then be addressed through the solution design or communications. When people understand the issues and are involved in problem-solving in real time, they shift to being enthusiastic, energized and committed to making the change happen.



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It was important to co-create the [digital transformation] strategy with the community. And it was also important to approach it, and communicate it, from the point of view of outcomes and what benefits it would bring, rather than talking about the technology.”

Jason Oliver, Chief Digital Transformation Officer,
University of Sussex, UK



Care

Building a culture where people's opinions are embraced and encouraged



Digital transformation is disruptive, and can be difficult and taxing for those involved in implementing it. It should be seen as a continuous process.

The journey never stops because technology, the competitive landscape, and the needs of learners and the workforce they hope to join are all constantly evolving. HE leaders therefore need to keep people invested in working toward the transformation over long periods of time. This means paying close attention to the ongoing emotional health of the university workforce.

In our cross-industry study, respondents in high-performing transformations were almost twice as likely to say their organization provided the emotional support they needed during the transformation process.

On this front, our HE study found that change fatigue is a real issue for universities. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the pace and amount of change happening in institutions has been unprecedented, increasing

burnout. Staff feel there is no "business as usual" anymore. They are constantly being asked to adapt to change, which they find exhausting. People also warned that cynicism or lack of trust can become rife in universities where staff experience frequent changes of direction, or they do not see the benefits of one project before another begins. Both leaders and staff recognized fears that technology (particularly automation and AI) will replace humans – a belief that can lead to significant resistance.

As they approach digital transformation, many institutions are prioritizing consultation to understand student and staff needs and issues, and inform the approach. And some are conducting regular check-ins with their stakeholders, to take the

temperature regarding the impact of changes and take remedial action, where necessary.

Concerns about consultation

However, in some institutions, consultation was more limited. Many staff did not feel their university was

listening. Even when consultation processes were conducted, people felt these sessions were presenting a solution that was a done deal, rather than genuinely asking open questions about what was needed.

Some people thought that, while students and faculty were consulted, administrative staff were just expected to implement what had been decided and were not included in the consultation.

On the other hand, some staff and leaders were concerned that too much consultation can slow progress. They described instances where it proved hard to strike the right balance between broad and inclusive consultation (which improves buy-in and can speed implementation) and making change happen quickly enough. For example, one new-in-post leader we spoke to told us they had spent their first 12 months consulting across the institution.

Not all universities are convinced of the need to consult with students to find out their needs and expectations – believing that students don't really know what they want and don't see the bigger picture. Some were even concerned that end users, including students, were being "over-consulted", and that response rates were therefore poor. In any case, most would agree that the cardinal sin was to solicit people's views but then not take them into consideration – the "appearance" of consultation.

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[Coming out of COVID-19 ...] we're now talking about new tools, and some of our faculty are saying 'let me just breathe.' After years of chaos, we need time to turn the temperature down.

Canada professional staff focus group

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More transparency could be provided, especially through lower levels. New digital technology and systems are implemented without firstly consulting those on the ground who will be using the systems.

Singapore professional staff focus group

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It feels like even if the feedback is being collected, sometimes it is not taken into consideration and does not really influence any outcomes.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group

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It's a balancing act. You can consult to death and end up discussing things for years, but you also need to make sure that voices are heard, that students are involved.

Canada professional staff focus group



How to plan for the emotional journey

As inclusive environments that value contribution and respectful challenge, universities have all the ingredients they need to create psychological safety. But leaders must keep focused on emotional support throughout the transformation process, anticipating emotional dips and going out of their way to support those in the thick of change – as well as paying attention to their own wellbeing. At the same time, empowerment and psychological safety must apply to the whole workforce, including casual staff.

Understanding the emotional baseline is key. If programs have been preceded by or include cost cutting, faculty may not be starting from a neutral point of view. Or, given recent challenges, the institution may already be suffering from change fatigue.

Important elements to consider as leaders seek to understand and manage emotions include:

► **Acknowledge.** One of the best ways to ground a transformation in reality is acknowledging that it's going to be hard. It's important to paint a down-to-earth picture of what the transformation will be like and talk openly about anticipated stumbling blocks. This is how leaders prepare the university workforce for what's coming and engender trust that, together, the institution will weather the storms ahead. Setting realistic expectations upfront and proactively helping people to manage stress during periods of intense change will help to keep sentiment positive, avoiding either anxiety or apathy.

► **Check in.** Leaders need to build in formal, emotional check-in sessions with their teams to understand how they are feeling and if anyone is struggling or needs additional support. But colleagues are not the only people who will struggle. As well as checking in with their

teams, leaders should make a point of checking in with each other. The agenda for these check-in sessions should largely focus on three questions to ensure the institution tracks and responds to the cycle of emotion:

- Where are we on the emotional rollercoaster of transformation?
- If we're feeling like this, how are our teams feeling?
- How can we support people to get through this?

Ideally, these meetings should be informed by sentiment surveys, success stories, shared learnings and data on key behavior indicators developed at the start of the transformation process. Leaders need to ask themselves: "If our transformation is working, what behaviors do we expect to see at each point? How are we tracking against those expectations right now?"

► **Communicate.** Strategic communication is important to keep negative emotions at bay during transformation. People who are dealing with change and uncertainty need regular, practical communication so they know what's happening, what's going well, what's different and what's next. For example, at Singapore Management University, leaders hold monthly campus-wide meetings to

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I gave the St Crispin's Day speech. Told them, 'Team — this is an historic moment. We are going to revolutionize the field of HR, and you have been chosen to go on the spaceship. It's going to be scary; we're going into the unknown and there will be bumps along the way, but we are the adventurers and will discover together.'

Michael Latsko, VP and CHRO, Arizona State University
(prev. University of Virginia), US

update on progress toward the strategy. Questions are invited beforehand and canvassed using a voting app, with the top-voted questions being answered live.

► **Listen.** A positive change culture emerges when leaders prioritize listening over telling and take into account diverse points of view. Throughout the transformation, everyone involved – especially resisters – needs a safe space to express emotions (good and bad). Given the need for rapid adaptation, universities are keen to find ways to accelerate the process of consultation and consensus-building, and find time-efficient ways of regularly understanding sentiment. The answer could include ongoing pulse checks and

questions via apps. Consultation must be inclusive of colleagues (and students) from diverse backgrounds and those with specific needs, including people with accessibility issues.

► **Ask.** Leaders can proactively create psychological safety by not only encouraging people with doubts and questions to speak up but also directly calling them up. This is about leaders being interested in and attuned to what's happening in their institutions, and showing respect and appreciation for the workforce and their insights by actively seeking their input.

► **Admit.** When leaders admit they don't have all the answers, others are more likely to offer their own thinking. One way to signal leaders' openness to new ideas might be to invite a number of frontline staff onto the transformation leadership team, giving them decision-making powers.





Empower

Setting clear responsibilities and being prepared for change

Historically, transformation has been considered a strictly linear process, where organizations gradually fall in line behind their leader's vision.

But our 2022 cross-industry research painted a more nuanced and complex picture. In successful transformations, leaders firmly steer the organization in an agreed direction while also giving people the freedom to own localized change processes, explore, experiment and let new ideas emerge. Respondents in high-performing transformations were more likely to say the change process they experienced was designed:

- ▶ To encourage innovation, experimentation and new ideas

- ▶ So that failed experimentation would not negatively impact career or compensation

In our HE study, focus group findings suggest faculty and professional staff are being encouraged to innovate as never before, in terms of developing new ways of working using digital technologies. Some administrative staff said they felt hugely empowered to innovate and were leading projects to find new ways to improve operational efficiency, learning outcomes and the student experience.

Concerns about sustaining innovation momentum

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major catalyst for innovation in the sector, forcing people to rapidly make changes that would have previously taken years. For some institutions, this more agile approach to innovation has persisted. Yet some staff bemoan the fact that, post-pandemic, traditional centralized change management processes have returned and are stifling innovation. The leaders we spoke to also described the tension between encouraging experimentation and innovation while coordinating innovation efforts centrally to support the overall strategy.

One common complaint among teaching and nonteaching staff was that, while many innovative approaches are designed or piloted, they are not implemented or adopted across the organization – often due to lack of investment in dissemination, training and support. It was also recognized that universities can be quite hierarchical institutions, which can slow innovation. Staff pointed out that, while universities are important sources of innovation, much of it occurs in isolated pockets and is for external consumption. People aren't used to disseminating or scaling new ideas or practices across their own institution.

“

[During the COVID-19 pandemic] It was kind of delightful to be out ahead of policy, working out how to teach in different ways. This has faded as change management processes try to gain control of all changes going on across the university.

Canada faculty focus group

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You need to ... give people the license to innovate. Internal staff mobility needs to be part of this. There are super-talented people who need to be empowered.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group





How to encourage innovation that supports the vision

While having a unified, central vision and digital transformation strategy is crucial, across an institution, the context for and requirements of transformation workstreams can differ greatly. Allowing adaptation is essential because of the very distinct contexts in, for example, medicine, education or the humanities. It's up to leaders to give teams or individuals autonomy and empower them to come up with creative solutions, while keeping those solutions aligned with the broader digital transformation objectives.

It's also important to recognize when experimentation needs to be more strictly controlled, such as in high-stakes areas such as assessments. Whereas in their teaching approaches, faculty can be given more license to experiment.

Introduce agile ways of working

The term "agile" is often associated with tech companies, but universities can also use agile delivery methods to tackle complex transformation challenges while also delivering benefits quickly. Cross-departmental working groups can be organized into squads to support innovation and transformation objectives, each accountable and empowered to achieve their assigned elements of the larger plan. Each squad works autonomously using agile frameworks and techniques involving short iterative sprints with incremental showcases, feedback loops and "go-lives" – coming together to share

learnings, make key decisions, celebrate successes and continue to adapt future sprints of work.

However, not all projects need the same velocity of delivery, and not all are as suited to incremental showcases and go-lives. Some projects – for example, those supporting modernization to core systems – benefit from more of a steady speed or "hybrid agile" delivery mode, which combines aspects of:

- ▶ Traditional "waterfall" approaches for planning components and well-defined project elements
- ▶ Agile methodologies for phased execution cycles and for project elements where the end goal or solution is unclear or not known

Universities must decide which delivery modes are best suited to achieving the outcomes for the project and potentially run a two-speed delivery.

Encourage experimentation within clear guardrails

Universities understand experimentation and are good at debate and discussion. Leaders will find no shortage of people willing to challenge the status quo. But to ensure experimental thinking remains on task, leaders should be clear on the overarching plan. Where will transformation dollars be spent first – and why? Which faculty will pilot a system that will eventually be rolled out campus-wide?

The key is to avoid hundreds of un-coordinated, small experiments across the university (termed by one client as "a thousand flowers blooming"). Even if these pilots are successful and their outcomes align with the vision, they rarely scale beyond the faculty or department. It's the equivalent of planting a cottage garden, where more aggressive plants self-seed and grow randomly while other, more tender but perhaps more useful, plants are smothered. Instead, universities need a plan for a "formal garden," understanding what will be "planted" first, and where and how to nurture each element to reach its potential.

As "planting" begins, metrics and measurement are critical. Leaders must set clear targets – the people (students, faculty, admin), financial or societal benefits that the innovation intends to achieve – and ensure processes are in place to measure progress against them.

As benefits are realized, they should be loudly communicated to develop trust and keep momentum and motivation going. This is how trust in transformation is built – through continual, proven execution.

Incentivize and reward innovation

Encouraging and recognizing innovative ideas and initiatives can inspire faculty and staff to participate more actively in the transformation process. Incentives might include funding, competitions, prizes,

public recognition, professional development opportunities or even new career paths.

In a community of experts and professionals devoted to furthering knowledge, public recognition is a particularly powerful motivator. Encouraging teams that created an innovative solution to present it – for example, at a conference or awards ceremony – can be very rewarding, boosting professional profiles.

Such incentives motivate individuals to think creatively, experiment with new approaches and continuously contribute to transformation success.

If universities are considering financial or other tangible rewards to motivate innovation or successful implementation, Mike Latsko suggests heeding Daniel Pink's³ advice to use "now-that" surprise rewards for a job well done, instead of "if, then" carrot-dangling. This focuses people on creating something great, rather than purely focusing on what they need to do to get the incentive.

Innovation should also be incorporated into performance goals. As mentioned in our [previous report](#), this may involve a change in the social contract with professors, who are typically incentivized to

produce leading-edge research but not to provide great teaching, let alone to adopt digital technologies to improve learning outcomes or student experiences.

For example, the University of British Columbia has a dedicated Educational Leadership Stream for faculty of around 15% of their tenured professors whose roles and advancement require that they have an impact on teaching and learning outside of their own classroom. This includes developing new tools and processes, and supporting colleagues in adopting new ways of working.

Innovation incentives in action

Deakin University, Australia hosts an annual Learning and Teaching Conference to reward and recognize excellence in teaching practice. It is a one-day, in-person event with a range of presentations and roundtables and an exhibition space for teams to showcase their artefacts. The conference sets a theme and invites teams to showcase how their innovations support the vision".

In Ireland, the Technological Higher Education Authority runs a Students as Partners in Innovation

Fellowship Programme, backed by European Commission funding. The program invites proposals from mixed teams of students and faculty to address innovation to enhance not only digital teaching and learning but also diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), universal design, sustainability and accessibility. Each of up to 100 selected projects is awarded €5,000. To qualify, projects need to demonstrate strong partnership between staff and students, which is expected to bring additional benefits in terms of skills exchange.

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[The Learning and Teaching Conference] ... is a great platform for teachers to showcase their innovations to their peers. It ... creates a community of practice around innovation, who champion its value.

Prof. Liz Johnson, Senior Deputy VC of Academic, Deakin University, Australia

³ Pink, Daniel H., "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us," Canongate Books, July 2018.



Build

Using technology and capabilities to drive visible action

Digital transformation success depends on universities identifying the right technology investments to support their vision, as well as making that technology available for use quickly, and training and supporting staff to use it.

This concept of “purposeful technology” was the factor most closely correlated with transformation success in our 2022 cross-industry study. Developing the workforce capabilities required to confidently deploy and use new digital tools and systems, and adopt new working practices, is clearly a critical part of this.

In our 2022 cross-industry study, not surprisingly, respondents in high-performing transformations were more likely to say their organization invested in and deployed the right technologies to meet the new vision. But they were also consistently more likely to say that their organization had both the digital skills and the digital mindset needed for transformation.

Our HE study found universities implementing a raft of new technologies to transform both teaching and learning, and their operations. But staff were not always convinced that the right technology was being invested in – a major concern given the limited resources available. Some told us it felt like leaders were taking a shotgun approach or just chasing the latest “shiny toy.” It was not always clear to them how the technology would deliver value. This perception highlights the importance of universities involving end users (faculty, professional staff and students) in co-designing the digital transformation roadmap.

Another issue is the question of whether universities are making the right “run-grow-transform” decisions. A classic problem has been the IT function spending the vast majority of its time and budget on “run” (keeping the lights on) activities and not devoting enough time or attention to the “grow” or “transform” initiatives. Universities need to find ways to strip cost and effort out of run activities and push more resources into grow and transform initiatives that will truly move the dial in achieving the university’s future goals.

“

You can't care too much about keeping the lights on — that just has to happen. You have to be focused on the innovation, because that's where the funding is coming from.

Jason Cowie, CIO,
Curtin University, Australia

Concerns about investment in technology and digital skills

A lack of digital skills – or a poor understanding of the new technologies and how to deploy them – appears to be a key hurdle in university transformations. Overwhelmingly, staff felt their institutions were not devoting enough resources to improving their digital skills or training them in the new systems. In addition to formal training on new tools and approaches, staff highlighted peer-to-peer learning and sharing of best practice as important to increase engagement and adoption.

Some said the IT department tends to assume a greater level of digital skills than there are (among both staff and students), leading to slow and poor uptake of new tools and poorly delivered digital learning. This is considered a particular issue among faculty – in particular, older, longer-serving faculty and those in the arts or humanities – who may need more support to adapt to digital tools and content.

Teachers especially will need to fundamentally change their mindset and learn about digital pedagogy if they are to embrace their new role in a digital learning or blended/hybrid learning model. They need to see their primary role, not as a creator of content and broadcaster of information, but more as a thinking coach and facilitator of learning. Making this shift will require a concerted focus on education and training.

The shortage of skilled IT professionals in universities was also mentioned many times as a key challenge and barrier to digital transformation. Some focus group participants said their institution was losing significant numbers of IT staff to the private sector due to the pay gap.

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Leadership seems to be jumping on the hype train with no real understanding of the tools.

Japan faculty focus group

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You can throw the money at tech all day long, but you're going to get nowhere until you invest in the people.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group

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We are losing 35% of IT staff, as they can get better pay in the private sector. The remaining IT people are overloaded with work.

UAE and Saudi professional staff focus group

How to develop positive digital mindsets as well as skill sets

Staff not only need to be trained in digital skills but also supported to develop a positive digital mindset. Transformation leaders therefore need to factor in the emotional dimensions of technology and process change.

To date, much of the investment and effort in HE digital technology has been directed toward **modernization** – enhancing existing systems without changing the business operating model – where the benefits of change are incremental and may not seem worth the effort required to learn the new system. As a result, people who experience modernization programs rarely develop a positive digital mindset.

But digital **transformation** fundamentally alters how a university operates – and gives people new opportunities: new ways of working; new ways of providing students with quality learning; and great experiences. For people to make the most of these opportunities, they must be encouraged to see their future linked to the new systems and tools. To engage with and apply new technologies, and be given the opportunity to develop new skills. This is how universities build a positive digital mindset campus-wide.

Investing in the right technology to achieve the vision

First and foremost, university leaders must ensure that any technology implementation supports the overall vision and isn't being implemented for technology's sake. Having a coherent, central digital transformation strategy and roadmap helps to reassure staff that the university is investing in the right technologies to support its objectives. While technology isn't the vision in and of itself, getting the technology right and showing how it will benefit users and help achieve the vision is vital.

Purposefully embrace technology

One of the most critical factors of transformation success is giving people the opportunity to experience the new technology and new ways of working as quickly as possible. We have all been involved in transformations where years pass between the initial vision and purpose, through design, to finally be implemented. It is hard to keep people engaged with the change over a long time.

Successful transformations get technology into people's hands early. This way, they can quickly see the

benefits and provide early feedback on additional opportunities or barriers that can be addressed in the subsequent iterations. When people see the transformation delivering and evolving, this helps to maintain enthusiasm and build trust.

To accelerate the time to use, and elicit early feedback, universities should consider:

- ▶ Defining their risk appetite in program planning, so reasonable access and opportunities to use the technology can be identified (i.e., does every aspect need to be 100% or are some tools able to be experimented with safely?)
- ▶ Giving people the opportunity to learn and train themselves in the technology and apply it to their work in pilots or small releases – building their own skills and organizational capability
- ▶ Identifying and generating actionable use cases and tying additional funding to further use case creation, so as many people as possible can get involved with the technology
- ▶ Monitoring both the emotional and rational feedback on the technology as people experience it – both in terms of their experience and how the technology works

Communicate deliberately and persistently about action and impact

Avoid a big gap between launch and action – and make sure everyone can see real impact quickly. It's easy for one department to be making real progress unseen to other parts of the university. When people see what's possible, they are more likely to be inspired to get involved in gaining similar benefits in their part of the campus.

Narrated success stories – for example, through posters or videos – help to bring transformation to life. Each semester, universities should be telling and celebrating transformation stories.

Give people the time and space to learn

To achieve digital transformation at scale, universities must invest in upskilling the entire workforce. All university staff need to be digitally mature, and teaching faculty must learn new ways of teaching. For this to happen, investment in staff development is essential. Learning will likely need to be delivered at scale, via large events or online platforms.

A challenge for institutions will be to persuade staff to make time for skills training in their busy schedules. Staff will need to be incentivized to undergo

the training and adopt new ways of working – for example, through inclusion in their development goals, or by demonstrating the time-saving potential of adoption for their day-to-day work.

Resistance to change is to be expected, particularly among older faculty or longer-tenured staff. Although some older faculty are early adopters and digital leaders, some aren't. Differentiated approaches may be needed for those who are less tech-savvy or wedded to traditional ways of working.

Given the pace of change, in future, universities will also need to design jobs with continuous learning as a core job requirement so that skills acquisition is built into the flow of work.

Elevate the IT organization and change its operating model

Successful wholesale digital transformation also depends on changing the traditional IT operating model. Additional capacity will be needed to deal with the higher volume of work required to run the transformation program and run legacy systems in parallel. New capabilities will also be required, including data, analytics and GenAI, alongside people with experience

of translating digital programs into business benefits.

Neither this capacity nor these capabilities are likely to be found internally. All sectors, including HE, are being challenged by the shortage of skilled IT professionals with up-to-date digital skills. Universities will be hard pressed to secure and deploy the right resources at the right time to deliver an agile program of transformation relying purely on internal resources.

The priority is therefore to move from a traditional IT department made up of internally enabled resources and individual contractors to a hybrid or partner-enabled IT operating model harnessing new types of as-a-service contracting with vendors. In these models, the existing IT department can be divested of commodity-type tasks that would be more effectively and cost-efficiently delivered by external parties. This not only builds capability and capacity but also supports the career progression of valuable existing IT staff.

In a digital transformation, the position of IT in the university is necessarily elevated. Shifting to a new IT operating model can be an important signifier and enabler of this elevation.

Encourage skills transfer from tech partners

When university staff collaborate closely with technology providers, a valuable exchange of skills and knowledge takes place. In

a mutual learning environment, staff can enhance their technical understanding and develop a new vocabulary while tech partner teams gain a deeper understanding of the specific challenges and requirements within HE. As one transformation leader put it, "This partnership is a

great experience for staff, supporting cross-functional collaboration and skills building. Staff working with the technical guys expanded their networks, their lexicon ... and their understanding of technology through hearing it every day.

The changing face of university IT organizations



Most, if not all services are managed and delivered in-house, with only key specialist needs and requirements being provided by partners.

Services are delivered in greater partnership with key vendors and partners, allowing the university to focus more attention on delivering customer excellence and improvement initiatives while leaving vendors to "keep the lights on."

Services are more heavily delivered by vendors and partner organizations, maintaining core capabilities internally and increasing the focus on vendor management with a reduced technology capability focus.





Collaborate

Finding the best ways to connect and co-create

In a successful transformation, lessons are learned across organizational silos; the workforce takes collective ownership of the program and is empowered to implement change, including co-creating new ways of working.

Our 2022 cross-industry study indicated that, among successful transformations, the search for new ways of working was deliberate and consciously involved both leaders and their teams. In high-performing transformations, 48% of respondents said the process was designed to ensure collaboration across different departments and units. The research concluded that buy-in cannot be a passive acceptance of change. Where new ways of

working were adopted successfully, leaders engaged employees to identify how work needed to change and what behaviors needed to shift to make the transformation successful.

In 2023, our HE study found that introducing new ways of working, involving collaborating across faculties, departments and colleges, represents a big cultural change for many universities.

Collaborate

Developing horizontal connections across the campus can be a major challenge. Individual faculties and departments often operate quite independently, making it difficult to coordinate digital transformation efforts and establish new ways of working. This is exacerbated by a lack of interoperable systems and an inability to share data and combine insights – an issue discussed in our [previous report](#). As a result, innovation tends to happen in isolated pockets, and the benefits are not shared or scaled.

Many focus group participants also reported a tricky “them and us” relationship between teaching faculty and professional staff. That said, some felt that the shared experience during the COVID-19 pandemic had improved this dynamic. The contribution

of professional staff during this tumultuous time made them more visible to faculty, creating a new level of respect. Some people also said that digital transformation had begun to bring administrative staff and faculty closer together, as cross-campus teams worked collaboratively to co-create courses and embark on digital projects together.

When creating cross-functional or cross-departmental teams, some university leaders were acutely aware of the need to proactively nurture the team dynamic – particularly when team members work remotely and may not meet often. For example, one leader suggested organizing away days to focus on particular challenges, or holding social events to build team cohesion.

“

There’s a sense that we walk hand in hand with staff and faculty – we learn together, we teach each other. I have enjoyed the collaboration and co-creation more than before.

UK and Ireland professional staff focus group

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Technical staff have been heroes to me. Not saying it’s been a great love-in between us in faculty and administrative staff, but it’s been better than it used to be.

Canada faculty focus group



How to keep connections strong to support transformation

Digital transformation should act as a “river” that allows different parts of the university to converge to support a connected future. This requires extending and strengthening horizontal connections across traditional faculty or departmental silos.

Make cross-campus connections

To build an environment of collaboration, universities need to develop a centralized way to oversee all the experiments and transformations that are underway and make sure the learning from each is being shared across groups. This may require more than encouraging teaming across different projects. Many of the universities we spoke to are adapting their organizational structures to help create these new connections to support digital transformation.

Options to make connections across a disparate workforce

Permanent structural changes	Project-based connectivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Centralizing core business functions; moving administrative staff out of faculties or departments to standardize business processes institution-wide; co-creating new ways of working and learn new tools together▶ Creating a central digital transformation office or steering committee reporting directly to the president or vice chancellor, with a diverse mix of faculty and professional staff leaders joining forces to oversee progress and budgets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Creating cross-departmental working groups for particular projects▶ Appointing digital champions in each department who are initially involved in the development, testing and promotion of new digital solutions, then empowered to support their rollout▶ Creating a dedicated education technology services team to provide technical support to teaching faculty or specific digital program rollouts



Collaborate

When considering how to strengthen horizontal connections, university leaders should:

- ▶ Assess and understand current effectiveness of cross-communication between silos that will need to collaborate for the transformation to be successful – don't assume people will collaborate
- ▶ Check that processes or mechanisms are in place for effective collaboration across groups, including internal collaboration tools and systems
- ▶ Work with the disparate groups to test and share their understanding

of the transformation vision and purpose to develop shared clarity

- ▶ Look for ways to build trust between groups – don't assume it exists
- ▶ Articulate rationale for collaboration: why should groups spend time working on this together – what is the benefit to them?

Keep connections going after launch

There's a danger that leaders will come together to support a big launch but then relinquish the transformation reins and let everyone

return to business as usual. People must continue to feel a sense of urgency to transform. They must see immediate changes that signal a new way of being and working at the university. For example, changing the organizational structure or moving resources to support investment in transformation.

Importantly, leaders at all levels can act to connect people horizontally to support transformation. This might include:

- ▶ Regular cross-leadership sessions specifically focused on the

How a “collaboration unit” helped a digital program to deliver value

A university implemented cognitive robotic process automation (RPA) to improve the student experience while increasing efficiency. As part of the effort, university leadership set up a collaboration unit within the finance office. The unit worked with campus infrastructure, finance,

human resources, research and student administration to pinpoint where the technology could deliver the most value – identifying 100+ potential automation opportunities. The unit then worked with functional leaders to prioritize ideas with the most promising cost-benefit

trade-offs. Within six months, the combined team was able to develop and implement 33 automations, which spanned allocations from back-office to student-facing functions. The university is now scaling and augmenting RPA automations with machine learning (ML).

transformation – its successes, pain points, learnings and opportunities to scale

- ▶ Taking diagonal slices of the university to create small teams of people whose sole focus is on accelerating implementation (these teams share learnings, plan collaborative efforts and seek out ways to avoid duplication)
- ▶ Bringing together the entire implementation group in periodic events to share success stories, problem solve, celebrate and talk about amplification

Identify and harness the power of influencers

Top-down leadership is important, but the most successful transformations also invest in bottom-up change. We know that, in the workplace, informal communication has more impact than that received through formal channels. And influencers lead the networks that are most important for the organizational adoption of information, attitudes, sentiment and behaviors.⁴

Transformation leaders can identify invisible influencers through organizational network analysis using micro surveys via a mobile app. These surveys ask three to four questions: Who do people turn to, listen to, follow or find most helpful? Data analysis turns the answers into a map of who's talking to whom – and who's not talking to anyone. Influencers can then be mobilized to support transformations, and communications adapted to reach isolated cohorts. Universities can also use AI to uncover the micro-behaviors that influencers can exhibit to scale change at pace.

How to influence behavior change at scale

The EY Behavior Influencer Platform analyzes informal networks to reveal influencers, uncovering the people university staff go to for information and emotional support – and how frequent and energizing those interactions are. The result is an influencer map at institution, faculty and team levels, identifying:

- ▶ Who are our invisible influencers?
- ▶ How do functions and sites collaborate informally?

- ▶ How do our people and teams get work done informally?
- ▶ How do hierarchical levels perceive formal leadership communications?
- ▶ Where do our leaders have influence?

Leaders can then listen to influencers via workshops where thoughts are captured on an app. A report, including verbatim comments and behavioral themes, helps to

identify micro-behaviors to create culture change to support the transformation. The idea is that leaders and influencers adopt one behavioral shift into daily practice once every two weeks. Gamified leadership can be introduced by asking direct reports to rate leaders' progress daily.

⁴ Guilbeault D. and Centola D., "Topological measures for identifying and predicting the spread of complex contagions," *Nature Communications*, July 2021.

How to put people at the center of your digital transformation



The digital transformation ahead of universities will require leaders to constantly support the people at the center of change and willingly step into the unknown.

As technology transforms the HE sector at an unprecedented pace, university leaders will be challenged to embrace uncertainty beyond their experience in a constrained **financial environment**. Wholesale digital transformation may feel unachievable within a tight budget. Leaders need the courage to invest enough to achieve their vision – and to drive the major workforce changes required to make the most of their technology investment.

The primary building blocks of any successful digital strategy are people, process and technology – in that order. Make no mistake, people are key to digital transformation success – even more so than choosing the right technology investments. Change will be a constant. Digital transformation is not one-and-done – but a continuous journey. The task of leadership is to find ways to keep people engaged in the change process. Leaders need to pay more attention to obtaining buy-in, nurturing collaboration, driving adoption, building skills and recognizing success.

That means appreciating the upheaval and change people have already been through. And accepting that the university workforce will need to be continually re-energized and given the right levels of emotional as well as practical support to continue to power the transformation.

As university leaders consider digital transformation, we recommend these practical rules of thumb:

- 1** **View digital transformation as a whole of organization program**, not a technology modernization program
- 2** **Prepare leaders across the organization to lean in** and pay attention to the emotional and psychological state of the transformation, to both hold each other to account and support each other
- 3** **Create a social movement of change** by consulting and co-designing with the whole workforce, investing adequately in change management and training, communicating strategically, focusing on the benefits, and finding and mobilizing invisible influencers
- 4** **Commit to getting things done quickly**, including giving people access to the new technology early on, so everyone has a sense of progress, and momentum and enthusiasm are maintained
- 5** **Come together across the organization to celebrate the benefits regularly**, to continually energize and keep momentum going

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- ▶ Prof. Stephen Gange, Executive Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs, Johns Hopkins University

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