The N-TUTORR National Digital
Leadership Network (NDLN) Digital
Leadership Impact Analysis Report

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TECHNOLOGICAL HIGHER
EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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Executive Summary

Established as part of the N-TUTORR programme, the National Digital Leadership Network (NDLN), aims to support and advance digital leaderships and digital transformation across Ireland's technological higher education sector. By connecting digital leaders at all levels across the sector, the network serves as a national hub for inter-institutional collaboration, shared practice, and strategic alignment. The network was shaped through extensive stakeholder engagement, including workshops and interviews, which revealed widespread demand for stronger cross-institutional collaboration, recognition of informal digital leadership, and more structured communities of practice. These consultations also highlighted persistent challenges such as fragmented digital practices, barriers to innovation, unclear career pathways, and inconsistent institutional readiness.

To address these issues, the network has adopted a values-led, community-driven approach focused on:

- Strengthening leadership capacity through peer learning and recognition
- Supporting staff development and inclusive digital pedagogy
- Advancing strategic collaboration between institutions
- Providing policy-relevant insights and sectoral advocacy

A core output of the NDLN is a series of horizon-scanning strategic reports that address critical digital challenges and trends such as AI in education, hybrid learning, microcredentials, data ethics, and academic integrity. These reports, written by key national and international scholars and experts, offer practical guidance to institutions navigating technological change and strategic planning.

The NDLN has already begun to deliver measurable impact by supporting shared initiatives, informing institutional strategy, and creating opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and practices. To ensure long-term sustainability and maximise impact, recommendations for future directions include:

- Embedding the NDLN into national governance and funding frameworks
- Formalising its structure and reporting lines to national forums
- Expanding its community of practice and events calendar
- Deepening policy advocacy and external partnerships
- Focusing on inclusive, forward-looking pedagogy
- Identifying sector-wide infrastructure needs and enabling joint solutions

Positioned strategically within the higher education landscape, the NDLN is uniquely capable of driving systemic change. With sustained support and strategic foresight, it can effectively champion digital leadership, foster sector-wide collaboration, and ensure that Irish higher education remains inclusive, resilient, and innovative in an increasingly digital age.

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Introduction

Overview

The National Digital Leadership Network (NDLN) is a collaborative initiative aimed at advancing digital capacity and capability across Irish higher education, with a particular focus on Ireland's technological higher education sector

Established as part of the multi-institutional N-TUTORR programme, the core objective of the network is to drive digital transformation by fostering inter-institutional cooperation and sharing of best practices. The NDLN is poised to serve as a national platform for leadership in digital transformation and digital learning, designed to build capacity within individual institutions while guiding the sector toward greater digital maturity and cohesion.The network brings together digital leaders from each TU to collectively shape strategy, standardise approaches, and strengthen digital teaching, learning, and assessment. This aligns with a broader policy shift that positions institutions—rather than external agencies—as the primary drivers of digital innovation and knowledge exchange.

In the wake of the pandemic and the establishment of new technological universities, the NDLN's role has taken on a special importance. Its members are committed to systemic change through meaningful digital transformation and the creation of more engaging, and more resilient future-focused learning environments.

Context

Digital leadership in higher education extends far beyond technical expertise or the adoption of certain tools and platforms: it's about vision, strategy, and culture change. Effective digital leaders ensure that digital strategies and developments align with institutional and national priorities, not only enhancing teaching, learning, research, and administration functions but also upholding academic values, promoting equity, and driving business innovation.

As digital technologies continue to evolve at a rapid pace, institutions face growing challenges in strategy, investment, and implementation. The NDLN provides a forum for leaders to share knowledge, resources, and expertise, ensuring that digital transformation aligns with both institutional and national priorities.

In this context, the NDLN aims to foster collaboration among higher education leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, providing opportunities to share insights, explore emerging challenges, and develop shared solutions. The approach undertaken by the NDLN has involved the bringing together of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in order to foster digital leadership capabilities, blending strategic vision with cutting-edge technological insights.

Through research, strategic reports, and events, the NDLN aims to deliver actionable guidance on critical digital challenges, from enhancing digital infrastructure to adapting to evolving teaching and learning needs. By harnessing collective expertise, the NDLN intends to empower institutions to navigate the complexities of digital change—driving innovation, improving educational quality, and shaping the future of higher education in Ireland and beyond.

Laying the Groundwork

Laying the Groundwork for the Network

The development of the National Digital Leadership Network was grounded in extensive consultation and collaborative design. Before the network was formally established, a series of workshops and stakeholder interviews were conducted to surface sector-wide needs, priorities, and aspirations. These activities provided critical insights into the lived experiences and needs of digital leaders and digital learning practitioners across the Technological Higher Education sector, and helped shape the NDLN's purpose, structure, and strategic direction. The following sections summarise the key findings from this foundational work.

N-TUTORR Workshop – March 2024

On March 6th and 7th, 2024, members of the N-TUTORR Steering Group convened at TU Dublin's Grangegorman campus to share ideas and connect their ongoing work.

Over the course of two days, robust discussions took place on project management, collaboration, and change leadership— intended to support attendees in driving meaningful and sustainable change within their institutions. The group expressed a shared ambition to effect systemic change across the Technological Higher Education (HE) sector by embracing digital transformation and enhancing the learning environment.

Participants identified a range of opportunities, from improving operational efficiency and learning from one another's transformation projects, to advancing academic goals such as educational equity, sustainability, and the professional development of staff and students. An overarching theme was the importance of leveraging momentum gained during the pandemic—particularly through emergency remote teaching—and opportunities arising from the formation of the Technological Universities and the development of a cohesive Technological HE sector.

Themes Emerging from the Discussions

Following a series of presentations about respective projects, participants engaged in structured conversations around six key questions, which focused on practice sharing, capacity building, staff development, leadership, barriers to innovation, and the value of a national network. The discussions, summarised and thematically analysed by the facilitators, generated a series of interlinked insights that speak directly to the aspirations underpinning the NDLN.

Shared Purpose and Fragmented Practice

Participants voiced strong alignment in their underlying values and aspirations for digital learning, with shared commitments to student-centred design, inclusive practice, and evidence-informed innovation. However, they also highlighted the fragmented nature of practice across the sector, with many reporting a lack of visibility and limited opportunities for cross-institutional engagement. The need for a "connective tissue", a mechanism to bring disparate efforts together, was a recurring topic, underscoring the strategic potential of the NDLN.

Leadership from Below

A major theme concerned the informal and distributed forms of leadership enacted by workshop participants. Most participants could recount experiences of leading digital transformation initiatives without formal recognition or institutional authority. This grassroots leadership was described as both rewarding and precarious, with participants often navigating ambiguous expectations and limited support. These accounts reinforce calls for the NDLN to legitimise and amplify such roles, offering not just community but also recognition and career development.

The Need for Communities of Practice

The value of structured peer support emerged clearly from the discussions. Participants expressed a desire for discipline-specific communities of practice that could support ongoing dialogue, experimentation, and knowledge exchange. These communities were seen as essential for bridging the divide between strategic policy and classroom practice, and for fostering a sense of shared endeavour within and across institutions. The NDLN was widely viewed as a vehicle through which such communities might be developed and sustained.

Professional Development and Career Pathways

Staff development emerged as both a need and a challenge. While there was widespread enthusiasm for CPD opportunities participants noted that time, resourcing, and institutional priorities often constrained uptake. There was a call for more flexible and embedded models of professional development, including micro-credentials and peer mentoring. Participants also highlighted the lack of clear career progression routes for digital learning professionals, a concern echoed in previous interviews. The NDLN was identified as a potential advocate for sector-wide approaches to career development and professional recognition.

Barriers to Innovation

Several structural barriers to digital innovation were identified. These included legacy systems, siloed organisational structures, risk-averse cultures, and insufficient investment in digital infrastructure. Participants emphasised that digital transformation cannot be driven by goodwill alone; it requires strategic alignment, adequate funding, and senior-level buy-in. These reflections point to the need for the NDLN not only to support practitioners but also to influence policy and institutional strategy.

A Role for the NDLN

Throughout the workshop, there was enthusiasm for the development of a national digital learning network. Participants articulated a vision of the NDLN as a platform for advocacy, resource sharing, community building, and leadership development. They stressed that the network should be inclusive, agile, and evidence-led, with a commitment to listening and co-creation. Several noted the importance of avoiding duplication, suggesting that the NDLN should build on existing initiatives and amplify what is already working.

Stakeholder Interviews Informing Network Design

Purpose and Design

To inform the development of the NDLN, a consultation process was undertaken involving semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across Ireland's higher education sector. Supported by N-TUTORR, the aim was to capture perceptions, priorities, and aspirations related to digital leadership, as well as to surface the challenges and opportunities facing digital learning professionals.

Ten of the fifteen interviewees were directly involved in the N-TUTORR programme. Most participants were drawn from the Technological Higher Education sector. Conducted between June and August 2024, the interviews followed a consistent protocol, with open-ended questions exploring participants' professional trajectories, the roles and recognition of digital leadership, structural supports and gaps, and expectations for a national network.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed to identify recurring themes and notable divergences.

Key Themes Digital Learning Themes Emerging from the Interviews

1. Digital Leadership as Relational and Contextual
   Participants emphasised that effective digital leadership extends beyond technical competence. It involves fostering collaboration, navigating institutional complexity, and bridging academic and professional domains. Many leaders described operating from the "middle" of organisations, challenging hierarchical models and underscoring the value of recognising emergent leadership outside senior roles.

2. Role Ambiguity and Recognition Gaps

Interviewees often described holding significant responsibilities in digital strategy and pedagogical change without corresponding titles or formal recognition. This professional "liminality" pointed to the need for the NDLN to advocate for clearer career pathways and the strategic recognition of digital leadership roles.

3. Infrastructural and Cultural Challenges

The readiness of institutions to support digital learning varied widely. Some interviewees described supportive environments; others faced inertia, fragmentation, and inadequate infrastructure. These disparities reinforced the need for a national network that can share good practice, foster collaboration, and establish shared language and benchmarks.

4. Desire for Community and Professional Development

A sense of professional isolation was common, particularly among staff in newly formed Technological Universities. Participants expressed a strong appetite for peer dialogue, mentoring, and professional development. The NDLN was seen as an ideal mechanism to address these needs.

5. Equity, Inclusivity, and Sectoral Transformation

Participants also viewed digital leadership as a force for equity and inclusion—broadening access and enhancing the student experience. They called for the NDLN to take a values-led approach, foregrounding the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of digital transformation.

Impact on NDLN Strategy

The insights gained from the interviews were instrumental in shaping the NDLN's strategy. In response, the network adopted a model grounded in community-building, peer-led learning, and distributed leadership. Its founding principles include:

- Establishing working groups and special interest forums to reflect key thematic concerns

- Developing a national framework for digital leadership recognition, addressing role ambiguity and supporting career progression

- Offering regular online and in-person events to foster connection and learning

- Advocating for the inclusion of digital learning leaders in governance and strategic decision-making

The interviews also informed the NDLN's commitment to agility and co-creation. Rather than imposing a fixed model, the network embraces an iterative and consultative approach, ensuring it remains responsive to sector needs as they evolve.

The NDLN Reports

The NDLN Reports

As part of its work, the NDLN has commissioned a series of horizon-scanning reports authored by leading national and international scholars and practitioners. These publications explore emerging digital trends and challenges, providing insights to help institutions align digital transformation with their strategic priorities.

Focusing on the intersection of digital innovation, educational leadership, and strategic planning, the reports offer actionable guidance for higher education leaders seeking to navigate and shape the sector's evolving landscape. Covering topics such as the evolving role of generative AI in academia, data-driven decision-making, academic integrity, new models of learning and teaching and new ways to plan for financial sustainability, this report series offers timely advice and direction for higher education leaders navigating the interrelated complexities of the digital and post-digital age.

For the purposes of this analysis, the NDLN reports have been grouped into six thematic categories:

1. Artificial Intelligence and the New Pedagogical Landscape
2. Changing Student Demographics and Financial Sustainability
3. Digital Transformation and Hybrid Models
4. Microcredentials and Lifelong Learning
5. Data Mastery and Ethical Use
6. Academic Integrity and Institutional Responsiveness

Each of these categories are analysed in the following subsection based on insights and implications for higher education.

1. Artificial Intelligence and the New Pedagogical Landscape

Insights

AI's pervasive influence on teaching, learning, and research is evident in multiple reports.

Whittle and Ransom trace the historical trajectory of AI in education, exploring its current capabilities and forecasting how responsible, ethical deployment can reshape student support and assessment.

Pratschke's focus on generative AI (GAI) also highlights the dual nature of these tools: on the one hand, they present immediate challenges to academic integrity and assessment practices; on the other, they provide opportunities for personalised learning and innovative pedagogies.

Equally important is the intersection with academic integrity, as Eaton and Moya demonstrate in their horizon-scanning work. AI-driven platforms have made it more difficult to detect plagiarism or contract cheating, creating an urgent need for institutions to proactively develop policies, training, and technology solutions that safeguard scholarly standards.

Implications for Higher Education

Assessment Redesign

Traditional essays and examinations may need to be complemented or replaced by authentic assessments that AI cannot easily replicate.

Policy and Governance

Institutions must develop clear, adaptable frameworks to govern the use of AI in learning, teaching, and assessment—balancing innovation with academic integrity and ethical considerations.

Staff Development and Capacity Building

There is a growing need for professional development that equips educators and academic leaders with a nuanced understanding of AI's pedagogical implications and practical uses.

Sector-wide Collaboration

Shared approaches, knowledge exchange, and community-led experimentation—such as those supported by the NDLN—can help institutions avoid duplication and respond more effectively to rapidly evolving AI capabilities.

2. Changing Student Demographics and Financial Sustainability

Insights

Bryant's study discusses the growing diversity in learner demographics and the increasing expectation that higher education will provide flexible, technologically enhanced learning environments.

Meanwhile, Scott's report focuses on financial and operational dimensions, offering strategies for outsourcing, SaaS adoption, and shared services. When taken together, these perspectives emphasise the interdependence of pedagogical, technological, and financial planning.

Implications for Higher Education

Equitable Access

Institutions must ensure that digital innovations and cost-saving measures do not exacerbate existing social or educational inequalities.

Long-Term Viability

New revenue streams—such as microcredential offerings and public-private partnerships—must be pursued in a way that supports sustainable growth and avoids overdependence on volatile markets.

Strategic Alignment

Embedding digital solutions in a broader institutional strategy can harmonise cost-efficiency with innovative teaching and learning models.

3. Digital Transformation and Hybrid Models

Insights

Weller's report underscores how the pandemic hastened a shift to online and hybrid teaching models—moving from a temporary crisis response to a permanent feature of educational ecosystems. Post-pandemic, many institutions have reverted to on-campus models, even as students continue to value the flexibility that hybrid modes afford. Large Language Models and other AI-driven tools have further questioned the long-standing reliance on conventional essays or standardised exams.

Echoing this, Deepwell focuses on hybrid working arrangements for both staff and students. Hybrid models demand new forms of digital leadership that prioritise inclusivity and adaptability, ensuring that pedagogical innovations align with the institution's strategic mission and financial realities.

Implications for Higher Education

Infrastructure and Investment

Institutions must invest in robust digital platforms, seamless technical support, and continuous professional development for staff.

Student-Centred Flexibility

Flexible delivery must be embedded in policy and planning—not just as a contingency, but as a strategic approach to widening participation and supporting diverse learner needs. Local context should inform, not hinder, implementation.

Digital Leadership

Senior management teams play a pivotal role in guiding a transition that balances pedagogical excellence with budgetary constraints.

4. Microcredentials and Lifelong Learning

Insights

Belshaw argues for clarity in defining "microcredentials" and advocates for interoperable technical standards (e.g. Open Badges v3). The practical significance of microcredentials extends beyond adding more options for learners: it provides higher education institutions with a means to capture and credential a wider range of competencies and experiential learning. In Ireland—and across Europe through initiatives such as the European Digital Credentials for Learning—microcredentials have the potential to align student learning more closely with emerging workforce needs and to support lifelong learning across diverse career stages.

Implications for Higher Education

Workforce Readiness

Offering shorter, targeted credentials can meet employers' evolving requirements, thereby enhancing graduate employability.

Strategic Partnerships

Collaboration with industry, professional bodies, and governmental agencies can help institutions ensure microcredentials remain relevant and widely recognised.

Quality Assurance

Microcredentials need rigorous validation processes to maintain institutional credibility and the trust of prospective employers.

5. Data Mastery and Ethical Use

Insights

Data is central to institutional decision-making, from admissions to student support services, yet many institutions lag in cultivating a robust "data culture." The report by Pope, Xiong, and Woodworth highlights the technology and skill sets integral to an AI-driven digital economy, emphasising the synergy between data fluency, responsible AI, and institutional sustainability.

Watermeyer, Guizzo, and Dzabolova further tie data usage to the concept of ethical digital leadership. Institutions must navigate complex ethical terrains—balancing commercial imperatives, technological possibilities, and the moral responsibilities towards students, staff, and society.

Implications for Higher Education

Curriculum Reform

Data literacy, critical thinking, and digital ethics should be core components across all disciplines, preparing graduates for a data-centric world.

Regulatory Compliance

As data protection regulations evolve (e.g. GDPR in Europe), institutions must ensure robust compliance and transparent governance.

Holistic Leadership

Ethical digital leadership must engage all institutional levels, promoting shared values and responsible innovation.

6. Academic Integrity and Institutional Responsiveness

Insights

Whilst Eaton & Moya's report specifically addresses integrity, it draws together many cross-cutting themes—digital assessment, policy, and the internationalisation of higher education. As the nature of academic misconduct evolves (from contract cheating to AI-generated content), so must institutional strategies. Proactive, holistic approaches—such as embedding integrity within curriculum design and harnessing AI responsibly—can bolster an institution's global reputation and educational quality.

Implications for Higher Education

Policy Harmonisation

Institutions with international partnerships must ensure a coherent approach to integrity across boundaries.

Technological Tools

Detection software alone is insufficient; prevention strategies and ongoing ethical dialogues with students are crucial.

Continuous Staff Development

Academics need regular training to stay abreast of emerging forms of misconduct and effective countermeasures.

Impact of the Network

Impact of the Network

At the institutional level, the NDLN has provided a mechanism for technological universities to accelerate internal innovation through external collaboration. By participating in a national network, individual institutes gain access to a pool of collective expertise that would be hard to cultivate in isolation.

Interviews with NDLN stakeholders highlighted that many institutions possess "pockets of expertise" in digital learning that were not being fully utilized, and the network seeks to "step into that space" to make such knowledge more visible and accessible across the system.

Early impacts are evident in how universities are learning from one another's projects and operational improvements. Institutional leaders, for example are sharing lessons on improving operational efficiency and student support services, avoiding duplication and siloed experimentation. This kind of cross-pollination of ideas has led to more cost-effective and innovative digital solutions, as best practices are replicated and adapted across institutions.. This cross-pollination of ideas has enabled more cost-effective and innovative digital solutions on campuses, as best practices can be replicated or adapted from one TU to the next.

Moreover, the NDLN's emphasis on digital literacy and staff development is bolstering institutional capacity; universities report a stronger focus on upskilling both faculty and students in the effective use of educational technology as a direct result of network conversations. Importantly, participation in the NDLN is also prompting each institution to align its digital initiatives with its own strategic goals and the broader sector vision, ensuring local projects contribute to a coherent national transformation agenda.

While still in its early stages, the NDLN has started to influence national policy frameworks and discourse around digital education. By design, the network operates across institutional lines, which positions it well to interface with government agencies, regulatory bodies, and other sectors of higher education.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) have been engaged as key stakeholders in the NDLN's activities, ensuring that insights from the network feed into policy discussions. For

example, network leaders have suggested that the NDLN (as a source of expert insight) should provide regular briefings to existing high-level forums – such as meetings of university presidents – to put critical digital issues on the agenda. Being an external, sector-wide entity (as opposed to any single university) gives the NDLN a certain credibility and neutrality in these national conversations, making it "easier for an external body to get onto an agenda" of senior decision-makers on topics that require collective action.

Challenges and Barriers

Challenges and Barriers

Implementing a nationwide initiative like the NDLN has not been without challenges. Through interviews and workshop analyses, several key barriers to the network's success have been identified:

Resource Constraints

Almost all institutions face limitations in time, funding, and personnel to devote to network activities. As stakeholders noted, everyone is essentially overstretched with existing duties, making it difficult to carve out time for extra collaboration. Financially, while start-up funding exists, there is concern about sustaining initiatives without straining already tight budgets. This necessitates the NDLN focusing on practical, scalable solutions that can be implemented with minimal extra burden.

Variable Institutional Readiness

The technological higher education sector is not monolithic – some universities have well-established digital infrastructure and teams, while others (especially smaller or newer ones) lack a "strong centre for teaching and learning and/or digital learning team". This uneven capacity means not all institutions can equally lead or absorb network initiatives. The NDLN must frequently account for these differences, providing extra support or tailoring approaches so that less-resourced TUs can keep pace.

Cultural and Change Management Barriers

A recurring challenge is overcoming ingrained ways of working and institutional silos. Several TUs are still grappling with the aftermath of mergers, where multiple campuses have "historically distinct identities" and even different systems, leading to reluctance to change established practices. There can be a "comfort in doing things the way they've always been done" among staff, which makes adoption of new sector-wide methods slow. Additionally, not all academics immediately see the

personal benefit of engaging with a national network. NDLN leaders observed that a small minority of staff – the true "luddites" – may never engage, but a larger group would participate "if you made it a little bit easier for them". This underscores the importance of change management: the network must clearly communicate value and create quick wins to bring along the middle majority of educators who might otherwise be hesitant.

Governance and Coordination Complexity

Orchestrating seven universities (and multiple partner institutes) is inherently complex. In the early phase, the NDLN has had to establish a governance structure that respects each institution's autonomy while driving collective action. Questions arose such as: how will the network be structured? What working groups are needed? Who does the NDLN ultimately report to? Settling these details is challenging, especially in a landscape where the traditional intermediary (THEA) is stepping back and encouraging institutions themselves to lead. Without clear roles and processes, there is risk of duplication or gaps in decision-making.

Sustainability and Funding Beyond Initial Phase

The most critical barrier identified is the uncertainty of long-term support. The NDLN is currently funded as part of a specific initiative (N-TUTORR) with a defined timeline. Participants widely acknowledged that many of the projects begun under this umbrella "cannot be self-sustaining" without continued investment or integration into core budgets. If no plan is in place, there is a danger that progress could stall once the initial funding cycle ends. This concern extends to infrastructure upgrades made during the project – for instance, digital tools deployed now might not be maintainable later unless institutions commit ongoing funds. All TUs see the need for structural funding (or reallocation of existing funds) to keep successful innovations running . The challenge for the NDLN is to make a compelling case for that continued support, by demonstrating impact and embedding its initiatives into each university's strategic plan so they become "part of the core… operations".

External Policy and Support Gaps

Finally, a broader challenge comes from the national context. The creation of technological universities was a major reform, but some national policies (and funding models) have lagged behind this change. As a result, the sector faces funding and regulatory conditions that are not fully aligned with its mission (e.g. research funding streams or digital infrastructure grants that historically favoured established universities). This external environment can constrain what the NDLN is able to achieve or scale. If, for example, government does not provision additional capital for digital infrastructure, the network's recommendation for modernising a certain system might go unfulfilled. Part of the NDLN's role thus becomes advocating to close these gaps, but in the meantime, they remain obstacles to smooth progress.

In confronting all these challenges, the NDLN has leveraged its collective nature as a strength.

The network serves as a support group where members share not just successes but also struggles, learning from each other's attempts to overcome local barriers. For instance, one university's strategy to incentivize faculty participation in digital upskilling (through recognition or workload adjustments) can be emulated by others facing staff resistance. Similarly, creative solutions to resource constraints – such as co-developing a tool so that costs and expertise are shared – have emerged from NDLN discussions. The transparent acknowledgement of challenges in forums like the NDLN workshops has been healthy, leading to a set of realistic strategies to mitigate these barriers as outlined below.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Future Directions and Recommendations

The continued evolution and success of the NDLN will depend on targeted, strategic actions to consolidate its gains and address the challenges identified. The following key future directions and recommendations , drawn from stakeholder insights and project analyses, outline a roadmap for sustaining and enhancing the network's impact.

Ensure Sustainability through Structural Integration

To ensure the network endures beyond the current funding cycle, it is imperative to institutionalise the NDLN within the sector's governance and funding structures. This could involve securing a commitment from the Higher Education Authority or the Department of Further and Higher Education to provide ongoing "hard" funding for the network's coordination, thus moving it from a project basis to a permanent feature of the HE landscape. Each HEI should also embed the NDLN (and its associated initiatives) into their core operations – for example, by allocating a small annual budget or staff time in their strategic plans specifically for NDLN activities. As one interviewee put it, "let's set something up that has a life past any individual funding period". Making the NDLN part of business-as-usual will maintain momentum and allow long-term planning.

Formalise Governance and Reporting Lines

A clear and agreed structure will help the NDLN function effectively and be accountable. It is recommended that a formal governance model be established in which the NDLN Steering Group (comprising representatives from all institutions) oversees thematic working groups. These working groups can focus on priority areas (e.g. curriculum innovation, digital infrastructure, staff development, policy liaison) and report back regularly to the steering committee. The steering committee in turn should report into an appropriate national forum – for instance, a designated subcommittee under THEA or directly to a collaborative forum of TU Presidents. This reporting linkage is crucial for legitimacy and influence; as discussed, positioning the

NDLN to "report into" existing national bodies responsible for digital education will cement its role in the policy loop. A well-defined structure (possibly illustrated in a governance diagram) will also clarify the network's purpose for participants and stakeholders.

Strengthen and Expand the Community of Practice

The network has proven the value of community-building across institutions; continuing and growing these efforts is vital. Regular in-person and virtual events (annual conferences, thematic workshops, "learning festivals") should become a staple to keep engagement high. There is "a genuine effort to build and sustain a community across institutions, beyond the boundaries of the N-TUTORR project" that needs to be maintained and broadened. One recommendation is to establish an online collaboration platform or portal as a permanent space for NDLN members to share resources, case studies, and updates year-round. Additionally, nurturing Communities of Practice (CoPs) around specific roles (for example, a community for digital librarians, one for instructional designers, etc.) can empower practitioners at various levels to contribute and benefit. Over time, the network might consider extending its reach to include other higher education institutions in Ireland (beyond the technological sector) in its events or working groups, effectively becoming a national digital learning network. Opening certain NDLN forums to all interested HE institutions could facilitate broader knowledge exchange and avoid siloing of innovation – a future where the NDLN "ultimately includes all of the institutions" in Irish higher education has been envisioned by some leaders. This inclusive approach would position the network as a truly sector-wide resource for digital transformation.

Deepen Policy Advocacy and Stakeholder Engagement

To secure the supportive environment it needs, the NDLN must continue and deepen its engagement with policymakers and stakeholders. This means routinely providing briefing papers or update reports to bodies like the HEA, THEA Council, and university Presidents' group, highlighting progress, impact, and outstanding needs. By couching the network's outcomes in terms of national priorities (for example, how NDLN initiatives contribute to Ireland's Digital Education Strategy or skills goals), it will help stakeholders appreciate the value of sustaining the network. Collaboration with external partners should also be pursued – including industry (EdTech companies), other public sectors (schools or further education interested in digital learning), and international consortia. Such partnerships can bring fresh perspectives and possibly new funding or pilot opportunities. The network could, for instance, partner with an international body to benchmark Ireland's progress or to host joint events, further raising its profile and knowledge base.

Focus on Inclusive and Forward-Looking Pedagogy

The next phase of the NDLN should double down on areas that combine Ireland's education values with technological opportunity. Inclusion is paramount – the network should craft a unified vision for inclusive digital transformation, merging initiatives in Universal Design for Learning, widening participation, and accessibility into a coherent strategy. This vision should inform policy and practice, ensuring no learner or educator is left behind.

Simultaneously, the NDLN should position the technological universities as leaders in emerging pedagogies. One concrete recommendation from the recent analysis was for the sector to lead on hybrid learning and produce a white paper on hybrid spaces post-Covid, capturing the rich lessons learned about blending online and in-person education. Delivering such a white paper (and similar thought leadership pieces on topics like micro-credentials or AI in assessment) would establish the network's reputation as a forward-thinking authority and guide policy nationwide. It would also help set future project agendas, potentially attracting funding to implement the recommendations from these papers.

Address Infrastructure and Investment Needs Strategically

To support its aims, the NDLN should continue to identify and advocate for critical digital infrastructure investments. A recommendation from the N-TUTORR workshop was for the project (and by extension the NDLN) to develop a high-level risk register for sector-wide infrastructure issues, highlighting where lack of investment could threaten strategic goals. By cataloguing risks (e.g. aging IT networks, cybersecurity gaps, insufficient virtual lab capacity) and proposing mitigations, the network provides leaders with a clear ask. Hand in hand, the NDLN can propose collaborative solutions – such as centralised procurement or support models – for certain technologies to achieve economies of scale and consistency. If, for example, the sector agrees on one learning analytics platform via the NDLN, it could seek a single procurement to cover all institutions, with shared training and support, making it sustainable. The network's future strategy should include pursuing these joint investments and ensuring that any critical innovations piloted under NDLN can transition into operational status with proper funding.

Conclusions

Conclusions

The National Digital Leadership Network has laid a strong foundation for digital transformation across Ireland's higher education sector. Its continued impact will rely on proactive planning to surmount challenges: securing long-term support, broadening its collaborative reach, and keeping its activities aligned with both institutional strategies and national policy objectives.

The recommendations above – from formalising its structure and funding, to championing inclusive and innovative practices – outline a clear pathway for the NDLN to move from an initial project toward a sustainable, sector-anchored network. By embedding these actions, the NDLN can outlast its original programme remit and continue guiding institutes in Ireland's technological higher education sector —and potentially the wider higher education system—through the next phase of digital transformation.

Looking ahead, the NDLN is well positioned to become a national catalyst for innovation, equity, and collaboration in digital leadership. Its sector-led, practitioner-informed model is a valuable template for meaningful change, not just within institutions, but across the policy and practice landscape. With continued investment, clear leadership, and strategic vision, the network can help ensure that Ireland's digital future in higher education is not only more connected but also more inclusive, resilient, and future-ready.