



WERA-IRN Progress Report 2024-2025

IRN Digital Academic Leadership in the New Era

Dr. Zhao Cheng and Prof. Chang Zhu

Department of Educational Sciences

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

On behalf of the co-convenors of the IRN

Introduction of the Annual Report

This report provides an overview of the activities and accomplishments of the WERA International Research Network (IRN), Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in the New Era, from June 2024 to June 2025, and outlines the IRN's plans for 2025–2026. In response to the evolving demands of higher education in the context of the “new normal,” and in light of the rapid advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI), the IRN has brought together academic members from across the globe to investigate, develop, and promote research on Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in higher education. Aligned with the original goals of the IRN proposal, literature synthesis research has been conducted during this period and has addressed foundational questions regarding the definition, dimensions, and development of DAL. This work has laid the groundwork for a more cohesive understanding of digital academic leadership across institutional and cultural contexts. As a major extension of this research stream, the IRN has also organized a Special Issue on “Higher Education Governance and Leadership in the Digital Era” in the journal *Education Sciences*. This initiative serves as a dedicated platform for scholarly discourse on the digital transformation of academic leadership and governance.

In addition, from June 2024 to June 2025, the IRN has organized a variety of academic activities, including international webinars, conferences, and leadership training programs. In joint efforts with

the LEAD Academic Network, a key milestone during this period was the development of a DAL Training Online Course designed to support the global academic community in understanding and enhancing digital academic leadership competencies. These activities engaged researchers and practitioners from a diverse range of countries, and the IRN network itself expanded as new members from different countries joined the activities of the IRN during the year, further strengthening its global reach and diversity. Looking ahead, the IRN will continue to disseminate its research and capacity-building efforts through international conferences, peer-reviewed publications, professional training programs, and virtual events. It will also actively invite new partners and country teams to join the network, with the aim of fostering inclusive global dialogue and promoting innovation in digital academic leadership in higher education.

IRN Research: DAL Literature Synthesis

Led by three conveners—Prof. Dr. Chang Zhu (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium), Prof. Dr. Marieta du Plessis (University of the Western Cape, South Africa), and Prof. Dr. Xuemei Yu (Shanghai University, China)—with coordination by Dr. Zhao Cheng (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, EU-China Higher Education Research Center, LEAD Academic Network), the IRN’s work on Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in 2024–2025 has made significant contributions to advancing the theoretical and empirical understanding of DAL in higher education. In alignment with the original aims of the IRN proposal, the literature synthesis research has addressed foundational questions such as: What is DAL? What are its core dimensions? What makes an effective digital academic leader? and How can DAL be developed and supported through training initiatives?

Through systematic and bibliometric reviews, the research has helped to consolidate fragmented knowledge in the field, define emerging trends, and identify conceptual frameworks that shape DAL. The findings provide an essential evidence base for developing a coherent, global perspective on digital academic leadership and offer practical insights for training and policy in higher education institutions worldwide.

During the 2024–2025 period, several key outputs have been produced:

- Systematic Review: Cheng et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of DAL in higher education, published in the *International Journal of Higher Education*. This work

synthesized a wide range of studies, identified existing models and dimensions of DAL, and proposed a refined conceptual definition of the field.

- Bibliometric Review: Olabiyi et al. (2025) carried out a bibliometric analysis using CiteSpace, published in the journal of *Education Sciences*. This study mapped the intellectual landscape of DAL, visualized citation networks, and highlighted key research clusters and knowledge gaps.
- Conference Contribution: Zhu (2024) presented at ICERI2024, exploring the DAL roles of research leaders in universities. This paper emphasized leadership practices in digitally transforming research environments and contributed to a broader discourse on DAL in international academic conferences.
- Competency Review: Cheng et al. (2025) submitted a manuscript to the Journal of *Leadership & Organizational Studies* focusing on the competences of digital academic leaders. This review study proposed a competence-based framework that is essential for guiding professional development and leadership training in HE.

These studies collectively provide a multilayered synthesis of the DAL literature, advancing both the theoretical framework and practical applications. They lay the groundwork for future empirical studies and the evaluation of DAL training initiatives, in direct support of the IRN's research agenda. The literature synthesis research reflects the IRN's commitment to global collaboration and cross-disciplinary engagement. The authors, including two IRN conveners and one secretary coordinator, involved in these studies represent diverse academic institutions across Africa and Europe, ensuring a rich, international perspective.

Furthermore, the IRN has organized a Special Issue on "Higher Education Governance and Leadership in the Digital Era" in the journal *Education Sciences*. This initiative is an important extension of the DAL literature synthesis effort, aimed at creating a dedicated platform for scholarly discourse on digital transformation in academic leadership and governance. The Special Issue was publicly launched with a Call for Papers, which received strong international interest. A total of 17 abstracts were accepted after initial screening, and all authors were invited to submit full manuscripts. Seventeen full papers were submitted for peer review, reflecting a broad spectrum of perspectives on digital academic leadership, governance models, institutional transformation, and policy implications. As of this reporting period, eight papers have been published, with others in various stages of review and revision.

The submitted papers include contributions from authors based in a wide range of countries, reflecting the global relevance of the topic and the IRN's commitment to international collaboration. Participating authors come from Belgium, China, Turkey, Poland, Croatia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, etc. These contributions address diverse higher education systems and institutional contexts, enriching the global understanding of how digitalization is reshaping academic leadership and governance. The Special Issue is expected to significantly enhance the visibility and impact of DAL research, as well as serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers worldwide.

IRN Academic Activities

General Introduction of IRN Academic Activities

The WERA IRN *Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in the New Era* engaged in a series of collaborative and capacity-building activities throughout 2024-2025 to address the evolving demands of leadership in higher education in the digital age. From June 2024 to June 2025, the IRN organized virtual group meetings via Zoom and Microsoft Teams to foster regular engagement among participating researchers across continents. Recognizing the importance of wellbeing in academic networks, the IRN also initiated online sessions to provide members with a space for informal sharing, reflection, and support.

As part of the IRN's commitment to global knowledge exchange, a series of international webinars on *Digital Academic Leadership* have been held, with presentations by country teams highlighting their ongoing research, national contexts, and key findings. To ensure inclusive participation, questions were distributed in early 2025 to identify country team readiness, focus areas, and support needs. Responses indicated various stages of project development, from conceptual frameworks to training implementation and evaluation. This allowed the convening team to design a structured webinar series, offering presentation slots and tailored guidance to contributors.

Another major milestone for 2025 was the design and launch of a DAL Training Online Course on Digital Academic Leadership, jointly developed by the LEAD Academic Network and the EU-China Higher Education Research Center at VUB. Developed collaboratively by members from Europe, Africa, and Asia, this course aims to offer scalable and accessible training for academics and academic leaders worldwide. The Online Course includes modules on leadership theory, digital vision, digital mindset & readiness, digital skillset, digital implementation, digital transformation and digital transformation

strategy, case studies from participating institutions, and reflection activities designed for early-career academics. Initial pilot use of the Online Course will begin in August 2025, with full public release planned for September 2025.

The IRN research team members from Belgium, South Africa, and China also formed the planning committee for the IRN's International Conference on Digital Academic Leadership, held virtually in December 2024. The event featured keynote speeches, panel discussions, and country-led research presentations. Target audiences included university administrators, leadership trainers, policymakers, and early-career scholars. The committee curated the program to include discussion prompts, country case comparisons, and an open-access publication of the conference highlights.

As the first year of the IRN (2024-2025) came to a close, the IRN convened a year-end strategic planning meeting, where each member and the involved institution reviewed their contributions, highlighted their DAL-related publications and training activities, and shared updates on upcoming national or institutional initiatives. The meeting also finalized the IRN's 2025-2026 roadmap, which includes:

- A round of the DAL Training Online Course rollout with live webinars
- Expansion of the digital leadership community
- Special issue results in *Education Sciences*
- Further DAL training events across Europe, Asia and Africa
- Continued outreach to new country partners and early-career researchers

The WERA IRN "Digital Academic Leadership in the New Era" will continue to serve as a research-based and practice-driven platform, promoting equity, innovation, and resilience in academic leadership globally.

Academic Activities linked to the IRN, co-organised by the LEAD Academic Network and the EU-China Higher Education Center at VUB (June 2024-June 2025)

Between June 2024 and June 2025, the WERA IRN "Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in the New Era" in collaboration with the LEAD Academic Network and the EU-China Higher Education Center at VUB organized a series of impactful international events to foster dialogue and research on academic leadership and global cooperation in higher education. These activities reflect the commitment of the convenors and the members of the IRN to advancing digital academic leadership through inclusive, international, and strategic collaboration.

International events

- Jointly organised with the LEAD Academic Network, a Symposia on Academic Leadership and Internationalisation were held at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) on July 4, 2024 and the University of Cyprus on July 8, 2024, bringing together global academic leaders to address the evolving challenges in higher education and the need for innovative and visionary leadership.
- On July 5, 2024, an Open Guest Lecture on Inclusive Academic Leadership in the Global Context was conducted at VUB, featuring expert insights from professors at Stockholm University and the University of the Western Cape. The event encouraged rich interaction among both in-person and online participants on inclusive leadership practices in academia.
- On September 13, 2024, the LEAD Academic Network and the IRN co-organized a Seminar on EU-China Higher Education Cooperation in collaboration with VUB, the Brussels School of Governance, and Beihang University. This seminar focused on academic collaboration through the Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet Programs, engaging 31 leaders and researchers from major institutions to explore pathways for stronger cross-border partnerships and educational innovation.
- On November 12–13, 2024, the LEAD Academic Network, in connection with the IRN, launched its Young Academic and Digital Academic Leadership Development Program for Shanghai University at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), initiating a five-year strategic partnership to foster international and transdisciplinary leadership.
- On November 15–16, 2024, the program continued at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa and the Museum of the Orient, engaging experts, academics, and emerging leaders from Portugal, Belgium, and China in intensive leadership training and intercultural exchange.
- On December 7, 2024, in connection with the IRN, the LEAD Academic Network 2024 Annual Conference on Future-Oriented Academic Leadership took place at Zhejiang University, gathering international scholars and leaders to discuss innovation, inclusivity, and future trends in academic leadership.
- On December 8, 2024, the Network and IRN members participated in the UNESCO Entrepreneurship Education Network National Chapter Annual Conference at Hangzhou Normal University, contributing to discussions on integrating academic leadership and entrepreneurship education.
- On December 18, 2024, the WERA IRN hosted a thematic webinar on “Educational Leadership and AI Integration”, drawing 48 global participants. This event launched a new webinar series exploring the transformative role of AI in education and academic leadership.

- On April 14–15, 2025, the LEAD Academic Network and the IRN organized a seminar on “Digital Leadership on the Use of AI in Higher Education” at Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul. The event convened academic leaders and researchers to address the integration of artificial intelligence in higher education, exploring opportunities, challenges, and leadership implications.
- From May 12–16, 2025, in connection with the IRN, the LEAD Academic Network hosted the second edition of the Young Academic and Digital Academic Leadership Development Program at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the University of Zagreb. The training emphasized cross-disciplinary collaboration, communication strategies, and the development of traditional and digital leadership competencies.
- On June 6, 2025, the IRN hosted a webinar on “Understanding and Developing a Digital Mindset in Academic Leadership”, continuing its 2025 webinar series. This event aimed to deepen global dialogue on cultivating digital readiness and strategic thinking among academic leaders.

Conference Presentations

- Zhu, C. (2024). DIGITAL ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP OF RESEARCH LEADERS IN UNIVERSITIES. In *ICERI2024 the 17th annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation : Session Educational Management* (pp. 8812-8816). Article 10.21125/iceri.2024.2216 IATED. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2024>

Special Issue on "Higher Education Governance and Leadership in the Digital Era" in *Education Sciences*

Published in the Special issue:

- Cheng, Z., & Zhu, C. (2025). Academics’ Leadership Styles and Their Motivation to Participate in a Leadership Training Program in the Digital Era. *Education Sciences*, 15(3), 369. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15030369>
- Doğan, M., & Arslan, H. (2025). Graduate Student Engagement and Digital Governance in Higher Education. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 682. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060682>
- Jing, M., Guo, Z., Wu, X., Yang, Z., & Wang, X. (2025). Higher Education Digital Academic Leadership: Perceptions and Practices from Chinese University Leaders. *Education Sciences*, 15(5), 606. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15050606>
- Kovacevic, M., Dagen, T., & Rajter, M. (2025). Leading AI-Driven Student Engagement: The Role of Digital Leadership in Higher Education. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 775. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060775>

- Li, X., Cheng, Z., & Zhu, C. (2025). Uncovering the Factors Affecting the Engagement of and Changes in Participants in a Blended Academic Leadership Development Program. *Education Sciences*, 15(2), 147. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15020147>
- Waligóra, A., & Górski, M. (2025). Competences of the Future—How to Educate the iGen Generation. *Education Sciences*, 15(5), 621. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15050621>
- Bollaert, L. (2025). Artificial Intelligence: Objective or Tool in the 21st-Century Higher Education Strategy and Leadership? *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 774. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060774>
- Olabiyi, O. J., van Vuuren, C. J., Du Plessis, M., Xue, Y., & Zhu, C. (2025). *Digital academic leadership in higher education institutions: A bibliometric review based on CiteSpace*. Manuscript accepted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Xue, Y., Chinapah, V., & Zhu, C. (2025). A Comparative Analysis of AI Privacy Concerns in Higher Education: News Coverage in China and Western Countries. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 650. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060650>
- Fan, W., & Fang, S. (2025). Linking International Faculty Integration to International Academic Impact: The Moderating Role of Institutional Digitization Level in Chinese Universities. *Education Sciences*, 15(7), 792. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070792>

Full manuscript submitted and under review in the Special issue

- Achanga, P. C., Kabasiita, K., & Rugumayo, B. (2025). Advocating for the adoption of digital leadership to stimulate staff attendance and performance: The case of a growing university. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Arslankara, V. B. (2025). Exploring academic competencies in the digital age: Assessing initial experiences with ChatGPT and evaluating usage and competence levels. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Cai, J., Hamid, A. H. A., & Mohd Nor, M. Y. B. (2025). Exploring academic competencies in the digital age: Assessing initial experiences with ChatGPT and evaluating usage and competence levels. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Fan, W., Fang, S.* (2025). Linking International Faculty Integration to International Academic Impact: The Moderating Role of Institutional Digitization Level in Chinese Universities. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Jing Tian, Kan, Y. (2025). Global science governance in the digital era: Content analysis of international organizations' open science policies from the perspective of policy tools. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Landa, E. (2025). Leveraging digital change: Leadership competency towards execution of emerging educational technologies. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Qi, Z., & Zhu, C. (2025). Perceived successful factors for virtual internationalisation in the context of digital governance. *Manuscript submitted for publication. Education Sciences*.
- Turner D. A., Li, X., Liu, B. (2025). The nature of AI and the governance of higher education. *Manuscript submitted for publication. Education Sciences*.
- Zhang, D., Song, B., Zheng, H., & Liu, H. (2025). The institutional evolution of Chinese university data governance: An analytical framework based on historical institutionalism. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Education Sciences*.
- Zhu, C. & Cheng, Z. (Dec 2024) Editor of Conference Proceedings, "Academic Leadership & Internationalisation in Higher Education: LEAD Academic Network Conference Proceedings"

https://2496e070-95cc-4096-895a-1d0d64024d10.usrfiles.com/ugd/2496e0_08b6661032b94c09801a1a3a6ce6b64f.pdf

Other publications

- Cheng, Z., & Zhu, C. (2024). Educational Leadership Styles and Practices Perceived by Academics: An Exploratory Study of Selected Chinese Universities. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*. <https://doi.10.1177/17411432241294171>
- Cheng, Z., Khuyen D. N. B., Caliskan, A., & Zhu, C. (2024). A Systematic Review of Digital Academic Leadership in Higher Education. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 13(4), 38. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v13n4p38>

FUTURE PLANS (June 2025 – June 2026)

In response to the accelerating pace of transformation driven by information and communication technologies (ICT), artificial intelligence (AI), and ongoing digitalization in higher education, the WERA IRN on Digital Academic Leadership (DAL) in the New Era will continue to pursue its mission of advancing research and fostering global academic leadership development. The following outlines two key focus areas for the coming year:

1. Research: Literature Synthesis and Theoretical Advancement

Building on the progress made in previous years, the IRN will continue to deepen the literature synthesis on Digital Academic Leadership, with the following objectives:

- Based on insights from systematic and bibliometric reviews, the IRN will finalize a comprehensive and integrative framework outlining the core dimensions, competencies, and contextual factors of DAL.
- Collaborative research will focus on comparing DAL interpretations and leadership needs across different cultural and institutional contexts, aiming to identify universal principles and context-specific variations.
- A new line of research will be initiated to examine the impact of DAL training programs—including Online Courses and workshops—using qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate outcomes, scalability, and long-term influence.
- Efforts will be directed toward the completion and publication of full papers submitted to the Education Sciences special issue, as well as the development of new peer-reviewed articles and co-authored book chapters. A symposium proposal for the 2025 WERA Focal Meeting has been accepted.

2. Academic Activities: Training, Engagement, and Dissemination

To build a global DAL community and translate research into practice, the IRN will launch several academic and capacity-building initiatives.

A flagship initiative of the upcoming year is the release of a DAL Training Online Course on Digital Academic Leadership. The course will:

- Integrate the latest IRN research findings and the research of associated members.
- Offer flexible, self-paced modules supported by video lectures, case studies, and reflective exercises.
- Target academic leaders, faculty members, early-career researchers, and policy-makers.
- Be complemented by live webinars, panel discussions, and regional case dialogues to enhance interactivity and application.

A series of webinars and roundtable discussions will be held in collaboration with international partners, focusing on themes such as:

- Leading in AI-driven academic environments
- Inclusive digital governance
- Innovations in digital leadership training

The IRN will co-organize two professional development programs tailored to current and aspiring digital academic leaders. These will be co-designed with partners from different continents to ensure cultural relevance and local applicability. The IRN will continue to invite new country teams to join the network, with a priority on representation from underrepresented regions, fostering inclusive and diverse global collaboration.

In short, the IRN's 2025–2026 plan emphasizes strengthening the research foundation for understanding digital academic leadership and expanding global access to research-informed training and engagement activities. By integrating scholarly inquiry with actionable tools and inclusive outreach, the IRN aims to empower higher education staff and leaders to navigate the digital era with vision, equity, and effectiveness.