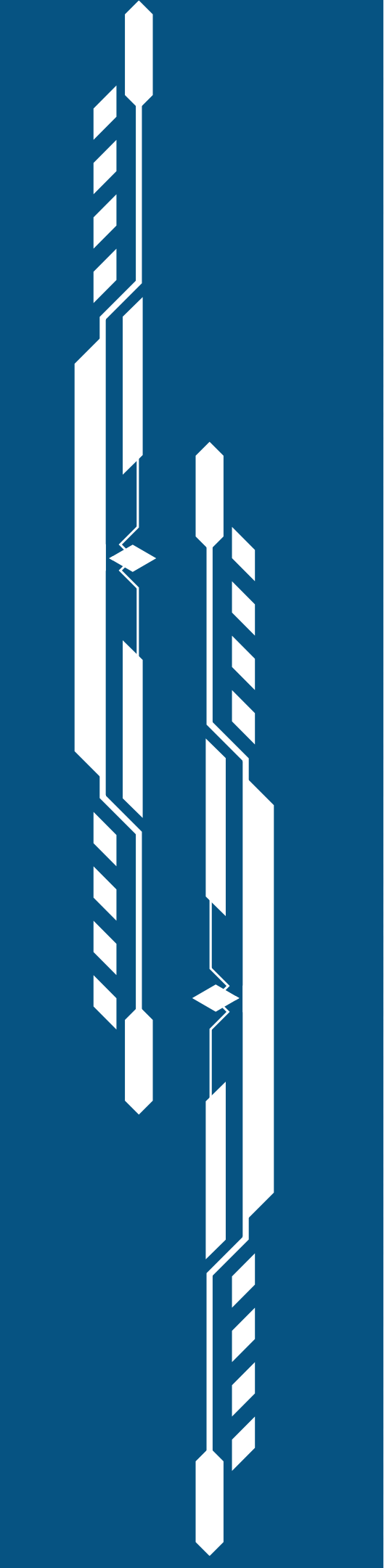




University of Wales Trinity Saint Davis

LEADING THROUGH DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: INVESTIGATING THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY BY FURTHER EDUCATION (FE) COLLEGE LEADERS IN ENGLAND

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Background and Context

Digital technologies have radically transformed the way individuals live, communicate, work, and learn in the 21st century. These changes have been particularly impactful within educational institutions, especially in the Further Education (FE) sector in England (Selwyn, 2016; JISC, 2020; OECD, 2021). The integration of digital tools and platforms has reshaped not only pedagogy and student engagement but also the expectations placed on institutional leadership. Leaders in FE are no longer confined to the roles of strategic oversight and curriculum delivery—they are now at the forefront of digital innovation and system-wide transformation (JISC, 2020).



Background and Context

The primary aim of this research is to investigate how FE college leaders in England engage with digital technology in their daily work. These leaders are pivotal actors in post-16 education, responsible for enacting policy, delivering institutional vision, assuring quality, and fostering continuous professional development. Increasingly, their responsibilities include cultivating digital fluency among staff, promoting innovation in learning technologies, and aligning institutional practices with frameworks for digital maturity (JISC, 2020; ETF, 2018).



Objectives of Research

1

- FE leaders' levels of digital competency and confidence
- FE leaders' perceptions of the usefulness and challenges of technological integration

2

The framework supports FE leader's require to lead digital transformation effectively

Research Aims and Questions

- FE leaders' levels of digital competency and confidence
- Their perceptions of the usefulness and challenges of technological integration
- The structural or institutional supports they require to lead digital transformation effectively

1

What are FE college leaders' levels of technological competence and their perceptions of their digital skills?

2

What are FE leaders' views regarding the utility of digital technology in their work, including their training and support needs?

3

What actions and frameworks do FE leaders identify as necessary to enhance digital transformation in their institutions?

Indicative Literature Review

1

Historical Context and Policy Drivers

2

Leadership and Digital Competence

3

**The Impact of Technology on
Educational Practice**

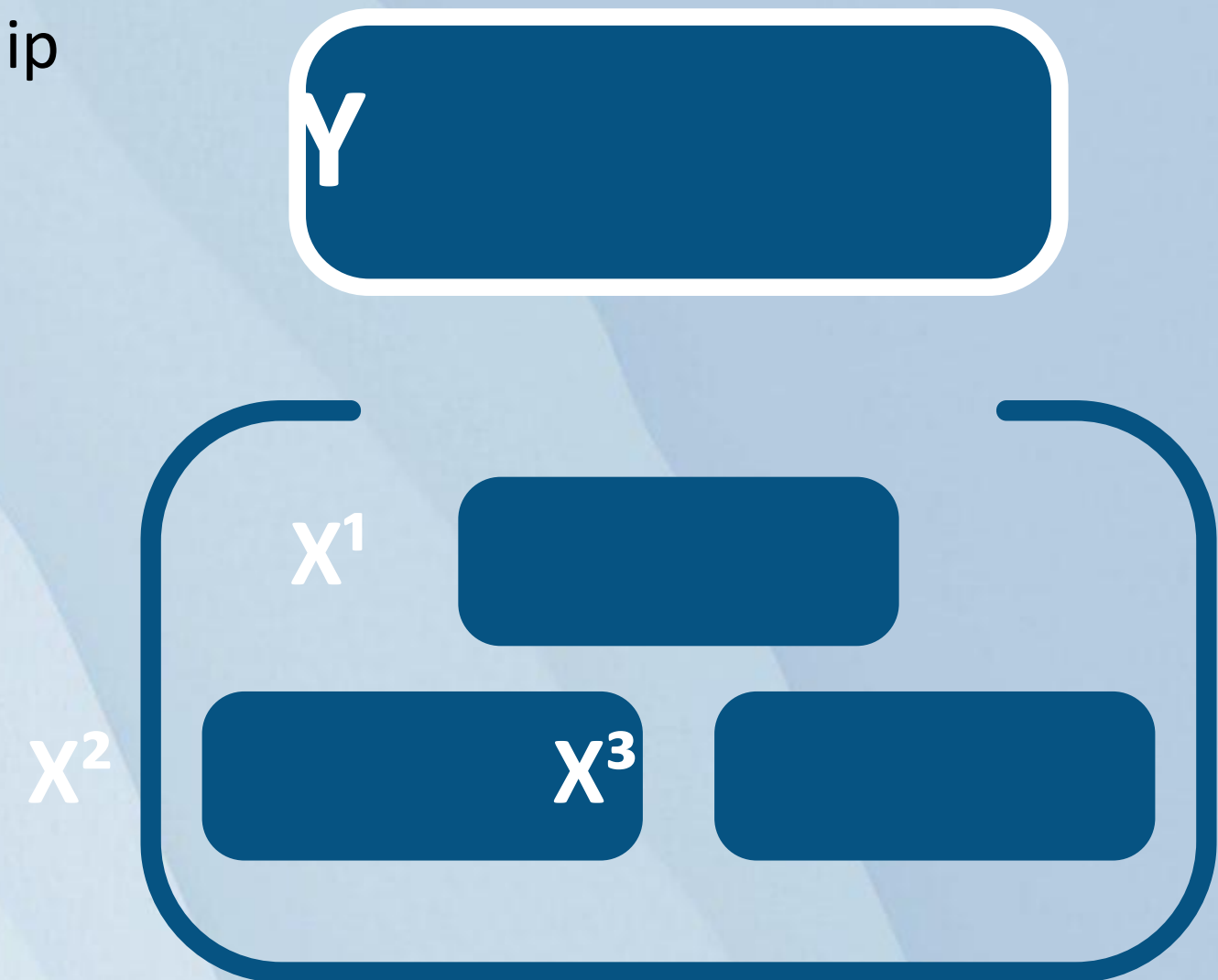
Indicative Literature Review

4

Challenges and Opportunities for FE
Leaders

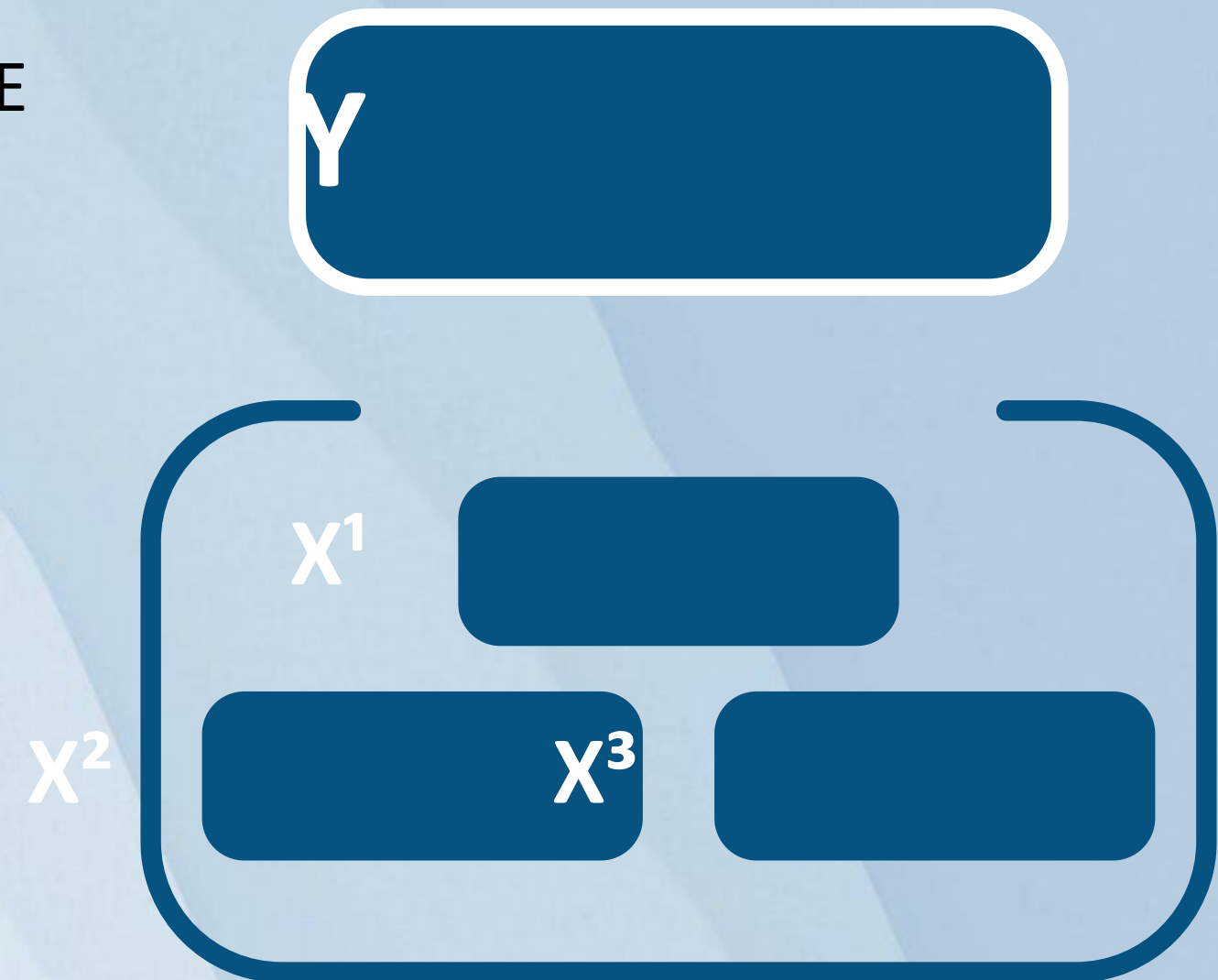
Identifying the Research Gap

- While the literature reviewed underscores the increasing relevance of digital technology in education and the critical role of leadership in digital adoption, it also reveals a persistent gap in empirical research specifically focused on digital leadership within the FE sector.
- Much of the existing research on educational technology and leadership tends to focus on primary, secondary, or higher education contexts with limited attention to the unique organisational, cultural, and strategic dynamics of FE colleges (Lumby, 2001; Greatbatch & Tate, 2018).



Identifying the Research Gap

- In light of these gaps, this study seeks to make an original contribution by providing a detailed, qualitative exploration of FE college leaders' use of digital technology in their daily work.
- It will explore their technological competencies, perceptions, leadership behaviours, and the institutional enablers and constraints they face.
- By doing so, it will offer context-sensitive insights that can inform leadership development, institutional strategy, and national policy for a digitally resilient FE sector.



Proposed Methodology

This section presents the philosophical, methodological, and operational framework for the proposed research, which seeks to explore the perceptions, technological competencies, and practices of Further Education (FE) college leaders regarding digital transformation in England. A sound methodology underpins the credibility, validity, and reliability of educational research, ensuring it is systematic, reflective, and ethically sound (Kumar, 2011).

There are several philosophical traditions underpinning educational research, notably positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism. The chosen paradigm frames how reality is perceived and how knowledge is understood and constructed (Walliman, 2011).

Given the aim of this study—to understand how FE college leaders perceive and implement technology—the interpretivist paradigm is deemed most appropriate. The study does not seek to test a hypothesis statistically but to capture the contextual and subjective nuances of leadership practices in situ.

Methodology

Qualitative

This section presents the philosophical, methodological, and operational framework for the proposed research, which seeks to explore the perceptions, technological competencies, and practices of Further Education (FE) college leaders regarding digital transformation in England. A sound methodology underpins the credibility, validity, and reliability of educational research, ensuring it is systematic, reflective, and ethically sound (Kumar, 2011).

Research Design

The study adopts a transcendental phenomenological design, a qualitative methodology rooted in the philosophical writings of Husserl and Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology seeks to describe the commonalities of lived experiences and to distil the essence of a phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon is the leadership and digital practices enacted by FE college leaders.

Justification for a Qualitative Approach

The decision to employ a qualitative approach is based on several key considerations:

Naturalistic Context: Data will be collected in the natural settings of participants—colleges or remote workplaces—rather than controlled environments, thus preserving contextual authenticity (Corwin, 2003).

Depth and Nuance: The focus is on gaining deep insight into the leadership practices and perspectives of FE leaders, something that numeric data alone cannot capture.

Perspective-Centered: The study centres on the subjective interpretations of leaders, making qualitative methods most appropriate (Brown, 2006).

Small, Targeted Sample: The research targets a defined group of professionals, for whom rich, narrative data are more informative than generalisable trends.

Area of Study and Target Population

- The study will be conducted with middle and senior leaders across a small selection of Further Education colleges in England.
- Participants will include Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Faculty, Heads of Department, and other staff with leadership responsibility for digital strategy.

Sampling Strategy

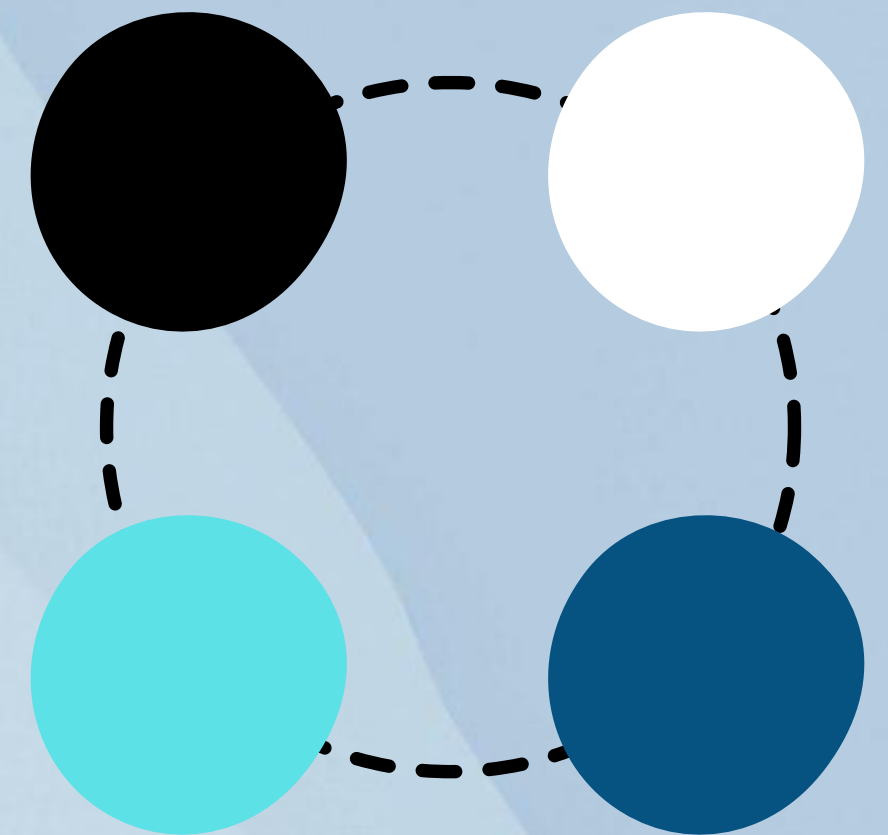
This research will use **purposive sampling**, a non-probability method where participants are selected based on their ability to provide rich and relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The criteria include their position within the college and experience with implementing or overseeing digital initiatives.



Data collection methods

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Aimed at capturing detailed insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategic approaches.
- **Questionnaires:** Distributed to approximately 30 leaders to triangulate findings from the interviews.
- **Document Analysis:** Institutional strategy documents, CPD plans, technology policies, and inspection reports will be reviewed. This provides a contextual frame and allows the researcher to compare espoused strategies with reported practice.
- The triangulation of these methods ensures validity and offers multiple lenses through which to interpret the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).



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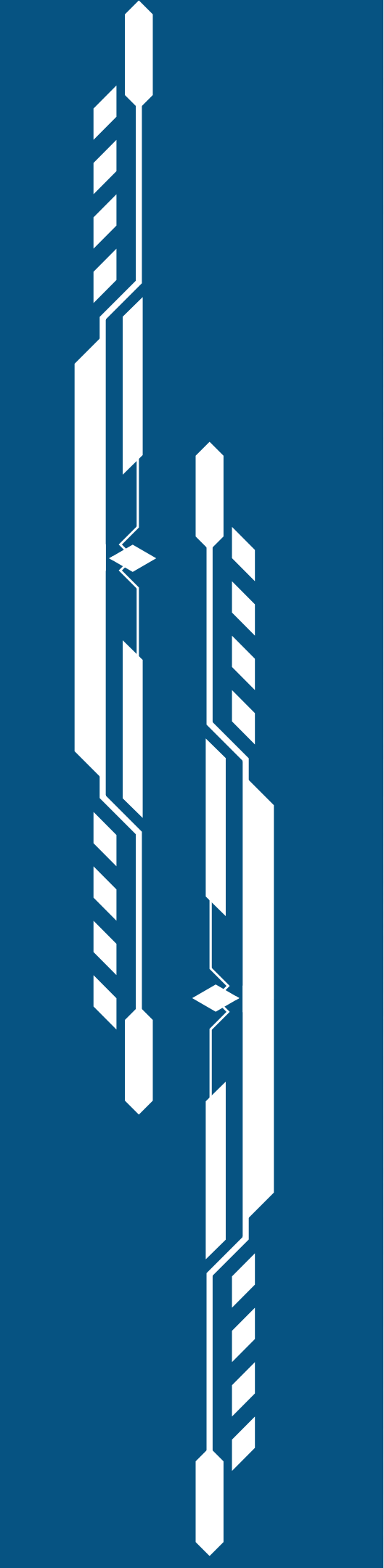
Ethical Considerations

- Ethical considerations are a cornerstone of sound educational research, especially when engaging human participants in professional contexts.
- The proposed study investigating the use of digital technologies by Further Education (FE) college leaders inherently presents a number of ethical challenges and responsibilities.
- In alignment with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) Code of Practice

Ethical Implications

- Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation
- Risk Assessment and Participant Wellbeing
- Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Data Protection
- Researcher Reflexivity and Power Relations
- Institutional Oversight and Accountability

Conclusion & Recommendation

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- **At the institutional level**, insights will inform the development of leadership CPD programmes tailored to the digital realities of FE. Such programmes could be invaluable in closing the current digital leadership capability gap, identified in previous studies (ETF, 2018; JISC, 2020).
 - **At the policy level**, the research could help shape national approaches to digital transformation in FE, advocating for targeted funding, flexible implementation models, and coherent guidance on the use of emerging technologies.
 - Furthermore, the research will contribute to a growing body of knowledge that recognises educational leaders not just as operational managers but as strategic agents of change. By documenting and disseminating stories of innovation, resilience, and challenge, the study elevates the voices of FE leaders and positions them as central actors in shaping a more digitally responsive education system.

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THANK YOU

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