ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Human + AI: Women leaders relearning leadership, identity and human capability

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Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping higher education and challenging traditional assumptions about expertise, teaching, assessment, scholarship and leadership. As knowledge and expertise become increasingly accessible through AI, leaders are grappling with questions about judgement, professional identity and the future of work. Whilst considerable attention has focused on AI tools, policy, and assessment reform, less attention has been paid to how leaders are making sense of AI-enabled change and how to support others through the uncertainty. Drawing on perspectives from participants in the 2026 ASCILITE Women in Professional Leadership (WiPL) program, this panel explores how AI is influencing work, learning, leadership and professional identity across higher education. Through provocative propositions and audience engagement, panellists will debate what capabilities remain uniquely human and whether the future of leadership is less about expertise and more about judgement, connection and purpose.

Keywords: Generative AI, women leaders, Third Space leadership, professional identity

Area of focus and rationale

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is prompting higher education institutions to reconsider assumptions about expertise, teaching, assessment, scholarship, employability and professional practice (Lodge et al., 2023). Scholarship highlights the ways women leaders are adapting to AI-driven change through inclusive leadership, mentoring and collaborative approaches to transformation (Huber et al., 2024). Drawing on the ASCILITE Women in Professional Leadership (WiPL) program, this panel focuses on the human dimensions of AI-enabled transformation and how leaders foster trust, connection and collective capability during technological change. The discussion is informed by two perspectives: Third Space leadership (Whitchurch, 2013), and the Leadership Identity Framework for Transformation (LIFT) (Tyrell et al., 2025). Third Space leadership provides a lens for understanding boundary-spanning roles that influence learning, teaching, student success and institutional innovation, while LIFT provides a framework for exploring leadership identity, influence, belonging and transformation developed in complex environments. These perspectives underpin the four propositions and frame discussion of how leaders maintain human-centred approaches amid technological transformation. Aligning with the conference focus on connection, collaboration, creativity and compassion, the panel moves beyond AI

tools and policies to explore how leadership, expertise and professional identity are being redefined and implications for the future of learning, work and human connection.

Ideas to be explored

The panel is structured around four interconnected propositions for discussion: 1) Relearning work. AI is changing the relationship between expertise and judgement. If AI can increasingly perform expert tasks, what distinguishes expert academics, educational professionals and institutional leaders? Should universities rethink graduate capabilities for rapidly changing workplaces? 2) Relearning learning. Learning how to learn is becoming more important than learning disciplinary content. What has generative AI revealed about existing assessment and curriculum design? What forms of AI literacy are most important for students and staff? 3) Relearning leadership. Leadership increasingly depends on connection, trust and influence. What aspects of leadership remain fundamentally human? How do leaders guide others through uncertainty while navigating it themselves? 4) Relearning identity. AI is reshaping our understanding of expertise and professional identity. How is AI reshaping professional identity, expertise and influence? Which human capabilities might become more important in an AI-enabled future?

Panel members and perspectives

The panel brings together recognised, emerging and aspiring leaders from the WiPL program across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Panellists bring expertise in learning design and educational development, educational technology and digital transformation, student success and learner support, Third Space leadership, and organisational change and capability development. Their roles span academic, professional and boundary-crossing contexts, enabling discussion of AI-related change across learning and teaching, staff capability, student success and institutional innovations, and how leadership, identity and influence are reshaped across organisational boundaries.

Format and audience engagement

The 55-minute session will include:

1. Introduction and framing of key propositions (5 minutes)
2. Facilitated panel discussion (25 minutes)
3. Live audience poll and small-group discussion around a provocative statement (10 minutes)
4. Audience questions and open discussion (10 minutes)
5. Closing reflections from panellists (5 minutes)

Audience members will be invited to respond to provocative statements, compare perspectives with peers, and contribute questions and reflections through polling, small-group discussion and Q&A. Their responses will be used to stimulate and extend discussion around the four propositions.

Intended audience, outcomes and key takeaways

This session will be relevant to academic staff and professional staff, learning designers, educational developers, institutional leaders and researchers interested in the future of higher education. Participants will gain insights into how women leaders are navigating AI-related change; explore alternative perspectives on the future of work, learning, leadership and professional identity; reflect on the human capabilities that remain critical in an AI-enabled future; and consider how connection, collaboration and compassion can remain central in AI-enabled environments. Key takeaways include questions for interrogating expertise and judgement, human-centred approaches to leading through technological disruption, and prompts for reflecting on professional identity and capability in AI-augmented educational contexts.

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