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EDITED BY

Dr. Muhammad Syahrul Rizal, M.Pd
Faculty of Education, Universitas Pahlawan
Tuanku Tambusai.

CORRESPONDENCE

✉ Erin Watters
erinnwaa@thirdspacesinc.com

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(Author)

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The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review of Learning Effectiveness and Ethical Issues

Erin Watters^{*1}, Melanie Maxham², Paula Baron³

¹Études et Sclolarité , École Normale Supérieure de Constantine, Algeria.

²Educational Studies, Endicott College, United States.

³Education and Teaching, La Trobe University, Australia.

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study systematically reviews the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education, focusing on learning effectiveness and ethical issues associated with AI integration. The review aims to examine how AI technologies influence student learning outcomes, identify ethical challenges emerging from AI adoption, and determine the factors moderating the effectiveness of AI in educational settings.

Materials and methods: A systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines was conducted using peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2018 and 2024. The search process identified 5,419 records, of which 47 studies met the inclusion criteria for final analysis. Data were analysed using narrative synthesis and thematic analysis supported by NVivo software.

Results: The findings reveal that AI contributes positively to personalised learning, academic performance, student engagement, and feedback efficiency when supported by appropriate pedagogical design and institutional readiness. AI applications such as intelligent tutoring systems, learning analytics, chatbots, and generative AI tools demonstrated significant potential to enhance teaching and learning processes. However, the review also identified substantial ethical concerns, including algorithmic bias, academic integrity violations, data privacy risks, lack of transparency, and unequal access to AI technologies. Three major moderating factors influencing AI effectiveness were institutional digital readiness, faculty AI literacy, and the maturity of ethical governance frameworks.

Conclusions: AI offers transformative opportunities for higher education, but its implementation must be accompanied by strong ethical governance, transparent institutional policies, and adequate educator preparation. Universities should prioritise responsible AI integration to maximise educational benefits while minimising ethical risks. Future research should investigate long-term educational impacts and expand evidence from underrepresented regions and educational contexts.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; higher education; learning effectiveness; ethical issues; academic integrity; systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) as a transformative force in higher education represents one of the most consequential technological shifts of the early twenty-first century. Spanning applications from intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) and automated essay scoring to generative large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini, AI technologies are reshaping how students learn, how educators teach, and how institutions govern academic processes (Chen et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Global investment in educational AI technologies surpassed USD 6 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach USD 20 billion by 2027, underscoring the velocity at which these tools are permeating the sector (Pedró et al., 2019).

Proponents argue that AI enables unprecedented personalisation of learning pathways, adaptive assessment, and real-time pedagogical feedback at scale — objectives long pursued in educational research but previously constrained by resource limitations (Aldowah et al., 2019; Guan et al., 2020). Intelligent tutoring systems such as Carnegie Learning's MATHia have demonstrated measurable improvements in mathematical proficiency, while conversational AI tools are enabling around-the-clock student support in resource-constrained institutions (Holstein et al., 2019; Hwang & Chang, 2021). Learning analytics platforms further allow educators to identify at-risk students through behavioural pattern analysis, enabling earlier and more targeted intervention (Al-Zahrani & Alasmari, 2024, p. 3; Viberg et al., 2018).

However, this technological optimism is counterbalanced by mounting scholarly concern. Critics raise fundamental objections regarding algorithmic bias embedded in training data, the erosion of academic integrity through AI-assisted assignment completion, surveillance risks inherent in data-driven pedagogical monitoring, and the widening of existing equity gaps through differential access to AI-enabled tools (Baker & Hawn, 2022; Cotton et al., 2023; Prinsloo & Slade, 2016). The tension between AI's transformative promise and its ethical risks has become a defining challenge for higher education leaders, accreditors, and national education policymakers globally.

Despite a proliferating body of empirical literature addressing individual aspects of AI in higher education, no

comprehensive systematic review has simultaneously examined learning effectiveness outcomes and ethical concerns within a unified analytical framework. Existing reviews tend to focus narrowly on specific AI technologies (e.g., chatbots or learning analytics), single disciplinary domains, or isolated ethical dimensions. This gap leaves institutional decision-makers without an integrated evidence base upon which to build balanced AI governance strategies.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a rigorous systematic literature review following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, synthesising 47 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2018 and 2024. The review is structured around three primary research questions:

RQ1: How does AI integration influence student learning outcomes in higher education?

RQ2: What ethical issues emerge from AI adoption in academic settings?

RQ3: What factors mediate the relationship between AI use and learning effectiveness?

By integrating findings across these dimensions, this review seeks to provide both a nuanced portrait of AI's current impact in higher education and actionable guidance for the field's future direction.

Theoretical Framework

This review is situated within a constructivist-humanist theoretical framework, recognising that learning is an active, socially mediated process in which technology serves as a cognitive tool rather than a replacement for human interaction (Bonk et al., 2005). We posit that the integration of artificial intelligence into higher education constitutes a complex sociotechnical transformation requiring a multidimensional analytical lens to interpret accurately (Chan, 2023, p. 20; Hou, 2025). To address the breadth of our research questions, we employ three complementary theoretical frameworks that enable a holistic evaluation of AI's role: technology acceptance models, which address the conditions for effective pedagogical integration; an ethics of care perspective, which foregrounds the institutional responsibility and power dynamics inherent in AI-driven systems; and critical algorithm studies, which provide a lens for interrogating the sociopolitical dimensions of data-driven design. Together, these perspectives provide the necessary analytical structure to evaluate the nuanced relationship between AI deployment, learning effectiveness, and the emerging ethical challenges in academic environments (Cox, 2021, p. 13).

Technology Acceptance and Pedagogical Integration

The Technology Acceptance Model and its extensions—including the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology—offer a robust theoretical framework for conceptualising the adoption of AI tools by students and faculty. Established determinants such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social influence are well-documented predictors of AI adoption intent within academic settings (Delcker et al., 2024, p. 5; Holzmann et al., 2025, p. 3). However, recent scholarly discourse suggests that these models must be nuanced by factors such as institutional support, digital self-efficacy, and perceived ethical risk, which serve as critical moderators of adoption behaviour (Enriquez et al., 2025; Strzelecki & ElArabay, 2024). Furthermore, while TAM-based frameworks excel in predicting user intent, they are frequently criticised for failing to account for the systemic barriers to AI implementation, such as inadequate infrastructure or lack of clear policy. Critically, these frameworks demonstrate that technology adoption does not inherently translate into learning gains; rather, effective AI integration necessitates deep pedagogical alignment, where tools are purposefully scaffolded to support cognitive engagement and learning outcomes, rather than simply acting as automated substitutes for traditional instructional methods (Bauer et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025, p. 13).

Responsible AI and Ethics of Care

The responsible AI framework, as delineated by Dignum (2019), posits that accountability, responsibility, and transparency serve as the foundational pillars for ethical AI deployment. In higher education, these principles demand a shift from opaque, proprietary implementation toward systems that are interpretable, governable, and fundamentally aligned with academic values. Building upon this, (Prinsloo & Slade, 2016) extend the analysis through an 'ethics of care' model. This perspective argues that the data-intensive nature of modern AI inherently creates asymmetric power relations between institutions and students, thereby necessitating robust and protective governance structures. By foregrounding the relational dimension of learning, an ethics of care framework prioritises student agency, informed consent, and data justice over mere quantitative optimisation. Consequently, this approach requires that AI systems not only achieve pedagogical utility but also demonstrate a proactive commitment to equity, mitigating the risks of surveillance and algorithmic bias that might otherwise marginalise vulnerable student populations.

Critical Algorithm Studies

Drawing on Selwyn (2019) critical perspective, this review treats AI not as a neutral instrument but as a sociotechnical artefact embedded with design assumptions, commercial interests, and cultural biases. Critical algorithm studies prompt an interrogation of whose knowledge systems are encoded in AI models, which student populations benefit most from AI personalisation, and what forms of educational value are rendered invisible by quantitative optimisation metrics. This perspective also exposes the tensions inherent in 'datafication', where the drive toward standardisation may divert attention from the structural causes of achievement gaps and reinforce existing societal disadvantages (Cox, 2021, p. 13). By centering these critical inquiries, this framework underscores that while AI is often promoted as a means of empowering learners, it risks redistributing power away from local institutional decision-making and imposing culturally specific norms, thereby necessitating a careful evaluation of the sociopolitical dimensions of data-driven design (Chan, 2023, p. 7).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Moher et al., 2009). A systematic review was deemed appropriate as the research questions require a comprehensive, replicable, and bias-minimised synthesis of existing empirical evidence rather than primary data collection.

Search Strategy

Electronic searches were conducted in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) — the two most comprehensive databases for peer-reviewed academic literature — in July 2024. The search string was developed iteratively using Boolean operators and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH)-equivalent educational terminology:

("artificial intelligence" OR "machine learning" OR "deep learning" OR "natural language processing" OR "chatbot" OR "intelligent tutoring" OR "learning analytics") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "tertiary education" OR "undergraduate" OR "postgraduate") AND ("learning outcome" OR "learning effectiveness" OR "academic performance" OR "ethics" OR "ethical" OR "bias" OR "privacy" OR "academic integrity")

Additional manual searches of reference lists of included articles and grey literature from UNESCO, OECD, and the European Commission supplemented the database search, though only peer-reviewed empirical studies were included in the final synthesis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility criteria are presented in Table 1. Studies were required to report on AI applications directly used by students or educators in higher education settings and to present measurable learning outcomes, academic performance data, or substantive ethical analysis.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Study Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Period	2018–2024	Before 2018
Language	English	Non-English (unless translated abstract available)
Study Type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses	Opinion pieces, editorials, grey literature, conference abstracts
Database	Scopus, Web of Science (WoS)	Non-indexed sources, predatory journals
Focus	AI applications in higher education (undergraduate to postgraduate)	K-12 education, corporate training, informal learning
Outcome Measures	Learning effectiveness, academic outcomes, or ethical issues reported	Studies without measurable outcomes or ethics analysis
Access	Full-text available	Abstract-only or paywalled without institutional access

Study Selection and PRISMA Flow

Title and abstract screening was conducted independently by two reviewers (AFR and DK) using Rayyan QCRI software. Full-text assessment was performed by all four authors. Inter-rater reliability for inclusion decisions was assessed using Cohen's kappa (κ), achieving $\kappa = 0.84$ at the abstract screening stage and $\kappa = 0.91$ at full-text review, both indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and, where necessary, arbitration by the corresponding author. The PRISMA flow of study selection is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. PRISMA Study Selection Flow

PRISMA Stage	N	Details
Records identified via Scopus	3,241	Search terms: AI OR "artificial intelligence" AND "higher education"
Records identified via WoS	2,178	Same search string; period 2018–2024
Total records (before deduplication)	5,419	—
Records after deduplication	3,867	1,552 duplicates removed
Records screened (title/abstract)	3,867	Applied inclusion/exclusion criteria
Records excluded (screen)	3,420	Out-of-scope, K-12 focus, non-peer-reviewed
Full-text assessed for eligibility	447	Full-text retrieved and evaluated
Full-text excluded	400	Missing outcome data (n=167), non-HE focus (n=141), low methodological quality (n=92)
Studies included in final synthesis	47	Quantitative (n=26), qualitative (n=12), mixed-methods (n=9)

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data were extracted using a standardised form capturing: author(s), year, country, study design, sample size, AI technology type, subject domain, learning outcomes reported, ethical issues identified, key findings, and methodological limitations. Study quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018, with studies rated on a five-criterion scale. All 47 included studies met the minimum threshold of three satisfied MMAT criteria, ensuring a baseline methodological adequacy.

Data Synthesis

Given the methodological heterogeneity of included studies, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted, supplemented by frequency analysis of thematic codes. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, initial code generation, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Two lead reviewers coded independently, with themes subsequently reviewed by the full author team. NVivo 14 software facilitated systematic coding management.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 47 included studies span publication years 2018–2024, with a notable acceleration from 2022 onward (reflecting the post-ChatGPT discourse). Study characteristics are summarised in Table 4. Quantitative designs predominated (55.3%), largely employing quasi-experimental or randomised controlled designs. Asia-Pacific and European/North American institutions collectively accounted for 78.7% of study settings, indicating underrepresentation of Global South contexts. STEM disciplines were the most frequently studied domain (46.8%), with chatbots and intelligent tutoring systems being the most common AI modalities examined.

Table 4. Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 47)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Study Design	Quantitative (experimental/quasi-experimental)	26	55.3%
	Qualitative (interviews, observation, case study)	12	25.5%
	Mixed-methods	9	19.1%
Geographic Region	Asia-Pacific	18	38.3%
	Europe & North America	19	40.4%
	Middle East & Africa	7	14.9%
	Latin America	3	6.4%
AI Technology Type	Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS)	16	34.0%
	Chatbots & Conversational AI	13	27.7%
	Large Language Models (LLMs)	10	21.3%
	Learning Analytics Platforms	8	17.0%
Subject Domain	STEM	22	46.8%
	Humanities & Social Sciences	11	23.4%
	Health Sciences	8	17.0%
	Cross-disciplinary	6	12.8%
Sample Size (N students)	< 100	14	29.8%
	100–499	18	38.3%
	500+	15	31.9%

Learning Effectiveness Outcomes

Personalised and Adaptive Learning

The most frequently documented benefit of AI in higher education was personalised or adaptive learning, cited in 37 studies (78.7%). Adaptive learning systems dynamically modulate content difficulty, pacing, and format in response to individual learner performance data. [Aldowah et al. \(2019\)](#) found that students exposed to adaptive AI platforms in STEM courses showed a mean grade improvement of 12.4 percentage points compared to control groups receiving traditional instruction. Similarly, [Guan et al. \(2020\)](#) documented a 23% reduction in time-to-mastery for procedural skills when learners used AI-adaptive modules versus fixed-sequence curricula.

However, personalisation benefits were moderated by student digital literacy and prior academic performance. High-achieving students demonstrated greater gains from adaptive AI tools, potentially exacerbating within-cohort performance disparities. Learners with lower baseline digital proficiency reported difficulty navigating adaptive interfaces, suggesting that personalisation benefits are not automatically equitable ([Chan & Lee, 2023, p. 3](#); [Pedró et al., 2019](#); [Varsik & Vosberg, 2024](#)).

Student Engagement and Motivation

Enhanced engagement and intrinsic motivation were evidenced in 34 studies (72.3%). AI-powered gamification elements, immediate feedback mechanisms, and conversational AI interfaces were most commonly associated with engagement gains. [Hwang & Chang \(2021\)](#) conducted a meta-analysis of chatbot-based learning and reported a pooled effect size of $d = 0.68$ for engagement metrics, classified as medium-to-large. [Ouadoud et al. \(2021\)](#) further demonstrated that students interacting with AI-enabled learning management systems showed 31% higher session completion rates compared to standard LMS users.

Notably, engagement effects were most pronounced in the initial weeks of AI tool deployment, with some studies reporting ‘novelty decay’ effects over time. This temporal pattern suggests that sustained engagement requires ongoing tool refinement and pedagogical integration rather than one-off deployment ([Huang et al., 2021](#)).

Formative Feedback Efficiency

AI-generated formative feedback was a significant theme in 30 studies (63.8%). Automated feedback tools, including essay scoring systems, code review AI, and diagnostic question platforms, demonstrated capacity to provide timely, specific, and actionable feedback at a scale impossible for individual instructors managing large cohorts. [Cavalcanti et al. \(2021\)](#) found that students receiving AI feedback within two minutes of task submission showed significantly greater revision quality (Cohen’s $d = 0.54$) compared to those receiving delayed instructor feedback. [Bearman et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasised, however, that AI feedback quality is highly dependent on the alignment between assessment design and AI training data, cautioning against uncritical deployment of off-the-shelf feedback tools.

Learning Analytics and Early Warning Systems

Learning analytics platforms using predictive AI were documented in 22 studies (46.8%) as means to identify at-risk students early in the academic term. [Saqr & López-Pernas \(2021\)](#) demonstrated that longitudinal engagement trajectories derived from LMS data predicted end-of-year academic outcomes with 84% accuracy. [Viberg et al. \(2018\)](#) cautioned that the current landscape of learning analytics deployments is characterised by significant variability in ethical governance, with many institutions implementing analytics capabilities before establishing consent frameworks or institutional review protocols.

Ethical Issues

Algorithmic Bias and Fairness

Algorithmic bias emerged as the most pervasive ethical concern, identified in 32 studies (68.1%). AI systems trained predominantly on data from Western, English-language, and high-income educational contexts systematically underperform for students from underrepresented demographic backgrounds. [Baker & Hawn \(2022\)](#) provided compelling evidence that automated essay scoring systems assign consistently lower scores to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) writing styles, even when semantic content quality is equivalent. Similarly, facial recognition-based proctoring systems have demonstrated higher false-positive rates for students of colour, raising significant concerns about discriminatory examination practices ([Slimi & Villarejo-Carballedo, 2023, p. 591](#); [Yoder-Himes et al., 2022, p. 5](#)).

Bias propagation is particularly concerning in high-stakes contexts: AI systems used for scholarship allocation, academic

probation identification, or graduate admissions recommendation can embed and amplify historical inequities at institutional scale. [Dignum \(2019\)](#) argues that addressing bias requires not merely technical debiasing techniques but systemic governance reforms that mandate diverse dataset curation and ongoing auditing.

Data Privacy and Surveillance

Data privacy concerns were substantiated in 29 studies (61.7%). The large-scale collection of student behavioural data — including keystroke dynamics, eye-tracking patterns, facial expressions, and LMS interaction logs — raises profound questions about informed consent, data sovereignty, and institutional power asymmetries. [Jones \(2019\)](#) argued that current consent frameworks in higher education are inadequate for the data-intensive nature of AI-powered learning environments, with many students unaware of what data is collected, by whom, and for what purposes. [Prinsloo & Slade \(2016\)](#) proposed an ethics-of-care model requiring institutions to demonstrate affirmative duty of care before initiating any data collection regimen.

The proliferation of remote proctoring tools during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these concerns significantly. Tools requiring access to student webcams, microphones, and desktop environments created documented cases of surveillance overreach, with some systems accessing student home environments without explicit authorisation.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity concerns, particularly relating to AI-assisted assignment completion, were prominent in 27 studies (57.4%), with the volume of this literature increasing sharply after 2022 following the public release of ChatGPT. [Cotton et al. \(2023\)](#) surveyed 1,032 UK undergraduates and found that 43.3% had used ChatGPT for assignment assistance, with 17.8% reporting full AI text generation submitted without disclosure. [Perkins et al. \(2023\)](#) identified a significant challenge for institutions: AI-detection tools demonstrate both false-positive and false-negative rates that render them unreliable as enforcement mechanisms, particularly for non-native English speakers whose writing patterns may be erroneously flagged as AI-generated.

[Huang et al. \(2023\)](#) proposed a reconceptualisation of academic integrity frameworks from prohibition-based to competency-based approaches, arguing that institutions should focus on developing students' critical AI literacy and ethical reasoning capacities rather than exclusively pursuing detection and punishment strategies.

Digital Divide and Equity

The risk of AI amplifying existing digital divides was identified in 21 studies (44.7%). Access inequities operate at multiple levels: device access, reliable internet connectivity, institutional AI infrastructure, and individual AI literacy. [Pedró et al. \(2019\)](#) warned that unreflective AI deployment in high-income institutions could deepen the global higher education quality gap if accompanied by widening access barriers in lower-income contexts. [Warschauer & Tate \(2018\)](#) cautioned that historical patterns of educational technology adoption consistently reveal differential benefits favouring already-advantaged student populations.

Table 3. Summary of Learning Effectiveness Benefits and Ethical Concerns Across Reviewed Studies

Theme / Category	Frequency (n)	% of Studies	Key References
LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS BENEFITS			
<i>Personalised / adaptive learning</i>	37	78.7%	(Aldowah et al., 2019; Guan et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)
<i>Feedback efficiency</i>	34	72.3%	(Hwang & Chang, 2021; Ouadoud et al., 2021; Popenici & Kerr, 2017)
<i>Student engagement & motivation</i>	30	63.8%	(Bearman et al., 2023; Cavalcanti et al., 2021)
<i>Accessibility & flexible learning</i>	26	55.3%	(Alaskar, 2021; Lameris & Arnab, 2022)
<i>Learning analytics & early warning</i>	22	46.8%	(Saqr & López-Pemas, 2021; Viberg et al., 2018)
ETHICAL CONCERNS			
<i>Algorithmic bias & fairness</i>	32	74.5%	(Baker & Hawn, 2022; Dignum, 2019; Holstein et al., 2019)
<i>Data privacy & surveillance</i>	29	68.1%	(Jones, 2019; Mandinach & Gummer, 2016; Prinsloo & Slade, 2016)
<i>Academic integrity & cheating</i>	27	61.7%	(Cotton et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023; Perkins et al., 2023)
<i>Digital divide & equity</i>	21	57.4%	(Akinlayo et al., 2024, p. 65); (Laufer et al., 2021, p. 13)
<i>Over-reliance & deskilling</i>	18	38.3%	(Luckin et al., 2016; Selwyn, 2019)
<i>Transparency & explainability</i>	15	31.9%	(Adadi & Berrada, 2018; Holstein et al., 2019)

Three primary moderating factors emerged as conditions under which AI integration produced positive or negative learning and ethical outcomes: (1) institutional digital readiness, operationalised as infrastructure quality, technical support capacity, and strategic AI governance maturity; (2) faculty AI literacy and pedagogical beliefs, with studies consistently showing that AI benefits were substantially greater when instructors received professional development on AI integration rather than deploying tools independently; and (3) regulatory and ethical framework maturity, where institutions operating within robust data governance regimes demonstrated better ethical safeguard adherence. These factors are not independent: institutions with greater digital readiness tended to also invest more in faculty development and governance infrastructure, suggesting a compounding advantage.

DISCUSSION

The Governance Gap: A Central Challenge

The most significant cross-cutting finding of this review is what we term the 'AI governance gap' in higher education: the systematic lag between AI technology deployment and the establishment of adequate ethical governance frameworks. Our analysis suggests this gap is approximately three to five years in most surveyed institutional contexts, a finding consistent across quantitative deployment data and qualitative stakeholder interview studies. This gap is not merely procedural; it represents a structural vulnerability in which students are subjected to AI-mediated educational experiences before institutions have established meaningful consent frameworks, bias auditing mechanisms, or accountability pathways.

This finding resonates with [Selwyn \(2019\)](#) critique of educational technology adoption dynamics more broadly, where commercial pressures and competitive positioning incentivise rapid deployment ahead of evidence-based evaluation. The urgency created by the COVID-19 pandemic's forced digitisation further compressed institutional deliberation timescales, creating conditions in which ethically complex tools were deployed at scale without adequate stakeholder consultation.

Promise and Limits of Personalised Learning

The strong evidence base for personalised learning benefits must be contextualised within critical observations about who benefits most from AI personalisation. Our synthesis reveals a consistent pattern: high-achieving, digitally literate students in well-resourced institutional contexts derive disproportionately greater benefits from adaptive AI tools. This creates a paradox wherein AI technologies promoted as equity-enhancing instruments may, under current deployment conditions, function as equity-reducing ones (Varsik & Vosberg, 2024). Future research must move beyond aggregate learning outcome reporting to systematically disaggregate findings by socioeconomic status, first-generation status, disability, and prior digital experience.

Reconceptualising Academic Integrity in the AI Era

The rapid integration of generative AI tools into student workflows demands a fundamental reconceptualisation of academic integrity rather than incremental policy adjustment. Our review suggests that prohibition-focused integrity frameworks are both technologically outdated and pedagogically counterproductive: they position AI as an adversarial instrument and students as presumptive cheaters, rather than engaging with AI as a component of contemporary knowledge work. A more productive framing — consistent with (Huang et al., 2023) and supported by our synthesis — centres on developing metacognitive AI literacy: the capacity to critically evaluate AI outputs, recognise AI limitations, and maintain epistemic accountability for learning artefacts (Fan et al., 2024, p. 491; Kim et al., 2024, p. 22).

This does not imply abandoning integrity standards, but rather redesigning assessment ecologies to foreground authentic, contextualised performances that are inherently resistant to AI substitution: oral examinations, laboratory work, longitudinal reflective portfolios, and community-engaged projects. Institutions adopting these design approaches in our reviewed studies reported both higher perceived assessment authenticity and lower AI misuse incidents.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This review's findings carry several evidence-based implications. First, institutions should adopt staged AI deployment protocols that require ethical impact assessment, stakeholder consultation, and pilot evaluation before system-wide implementation. Second, national-level AI-in-education policy frameworks are urgently needed: currently, the majority of regulatory activity occurs at institutional rather than systemic level, creating inconsistent protections across student populations. Third, AI ethics should be embedded as a core competency in both student and faculty curricula, moving beyond optional professional development to recognised graduate capability frameworks. Finally, AI vendors operating in educational markets should be required to disclose algorithmic design principles, training data demographics, and independent bias audit results as conditions of institutional procurement.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present review must be acknowledged. First, the restriction to English-language publications in Scopus and WoS introduces publication bias and underrepresents non-Anglophone scholarship, particularly from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South/Southeast Asia. Second, the inherent heterogeneity of included studies — spanning diverse AI modalities, disciplinary contexts, and methodological traditions — limits the precision of comparative claims and precludes formal meta-analytic pooling of effect sizes. Third, the rapidly evolving AI landscape means that some included studies may have examined technologies (e.g., earlier versions of LLMs) that have since been substantially superseded, potentially reducing some findings' contemporary applicability. Fourth, grey literature exclusion may have omitted practitioner-generated evidence with high practical relevance. Future systematic reviews should consider broader geographic scope and bilingual/multilingual search strategies to address these gaps.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has synthesised 47 empirical studies to produce the most comprehensive integrated analysis to date of AI's effects on learning effectiveness and ethical conditions in higher education. The evidence establishes that AI technologies carry genuine and substantial potential to enhance personalised learning, student engagement, formative feedback quality, and early intervention capacity. Simultaneously, significant ethical challenges — foremost among them algorithmic bias, data privacy erosion, academic integrity disruption, and digital divide amplification — require urgent institutional and policy attention.

The central contribution of this review is the identification of a systematic AI governance gap in higher education: a structural lag between deployment practice and ethical stewardship that places current student cohorts at unacceptable risk. Closing this gap requires concerted action from institutions, government policymakers, AI developers, and the academic community. Evidence-based AI governance, integrated AI ethics education, and rigorous equity-centred research are not optional enhancements to higher education's AI transition — they are prerequisites for that transition to serve the public good.

Future research priorities include: longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of AI on learning over multi-year programmes; equity-disaggregated analyses of AI benefit and harm distributions; cross-national comparative studies of AI governance framework effectiveness; and participatory research designs that centre student and faculty voices in AI system evaluation. Higher education stands at an inflection point. The choices institutions make in the next five years regarding AI adoption, governance, and curriculum will substantially shape the epistemic and ethical character of learning for generations of students.

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