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Rethinking University Governance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Ethics, Accountability, and Human-Centered Decision-Making

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Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence technologies in the governance of higher education appears to occur with record speed, altering the governance structures, the accountabilities, as well as the normative frameworks of universities. On the one hand, artificial intelligence technologies, through their integration in university governance, may serve as effective management tools that could enhance efficiency in the administration of the university. On the contrary, artificial intelligence technologies are also seen as challenging the prevailing governance structures, which were established with a focus on serving human actors. This article specifically critically rethinks university governance in the era of artificial intelligence. In essence, this particular piece of work examines, through the application of structural literature survey, the following particular dimensions of university governance in the era of artificial intelligence: the limitations of the prevailing structures in managing artificial intelligence-based decision-making processes in the university, as well as the role of ethical considerations in maintaining institutional legitimacy during the adoption of artificial intelligence technologies in university governance. The study contributes to this ongoing debate by specifying the conditions of governance through which artificial intelligence has a salutary effect on academic values, democratic accountability, and trust, as opposed to a detrimental effect, and thereby lays a basis for further research.

Key Words: AI in Higher Education Governance, Algorithmic Decision-Making, Transparency & Accountability, Ethics & Public Trust, Responsible AI Adoption

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has been recognized as a revolutionary force within the realm of higher education, impacting diverse aspects such as the selection of students and learning analytics, to research and even governance. An increasing number of learning institutions are seeking AI-driven solutions that may be supportive to their strategic planning, administrative efficiency, and the enhancement of the accuracy of their decision-making procedures. Unfortunately, the acceleration of the integration of technology into the learning market has been consistently swift and dramatic, which has outgrown the evolution of the governance

structures that tend to be fundamentally built on the basis of collegial, managerial, and hybrid models that focus on the decision processes of humans. Therefore, the adoption of AI is recognized as a critical governance challenge that places the sense of authority and accountability at the forefront.

There are some traditional models of university governance, which are marked by the distribution of decision-making power, academic freedom, and normative goals related to fairness and deliberations. Such models are challenged by the emergence of AI systems that are marked by different forms of algorithmic power, which affect the power balance, decision logic, and the assignment of responsibility. Automated decision tools are marked by unclear decision models, depend on large infrastructures of data, and are characterized by normative assumptions, which might be in conflict with academic norms.

In response to these developments, the focus of scholarly interest has increasingly centered on AI governance within public institutions, as reflected by the emphasis on transparency, accountability, and ethics. Nevertheless, existing literature portrays a disorganized distribution of scholarly interests along disciplinary lines, with limited junctures drawn between the literature on the governance of universities and the pertinent literature on the subject of algorithmic governance. In a broad sense, whereas the majority of literature has concentrated on the implications of governance for university trust, a comprehensive synthesis has rarely been presented to illustrate the relationship between models of governance, transparency, and ethical considerations as they influence university trust.

This article will fill the gap by examining the interrelated issues of university governance in the context of artificial intelligence by conducting an extensive literature review based on its three core dimensions. This is in addition to an assessment of the structural shortcomings of the traditional approach to university governance in the context of artificial intelligence and the rigidity of such an approach. Finally, the article will also examine the ethical drivers of the role of artificial intelligence in the context of university governance and the crucial need to maintain the trust of the academic community. In so doing, the article will attempt to conceptualize the imperatives of artificial intelligence governance in the context of the academic community.

1. Governance Models and Decision-Making Structures in Higher Education

In this section, a review of literature has been presented on university governance and decision-making across the scope of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The focus has been on analyzing how traditional governance practices, collegial, managerial, shared, and network-based, address trends related to the adoption and increased reliance on AI-based systems within higher education institutions. The review presents an interdisciplinary examination of literature on higher education governance, ethics of Artificial Intelligence, and policy-making, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence, especially on dimensions of adequacy, flexibility, and regulatory preparedness. Through a critical comparison of these approaches, this section reveals a number of underlying gaps within the dominant approaches to managing and governing the uptake and utilization of AI at the level of higher learning institutions. These underlying gaps and contradictions serve as a rationale for this particular study and

dovetail directly into a rethought framework for addressing university-level governance, as discussed within the following section.

Typically, conventional approaches to governing universities have been grounded in a human-centric model in which deliberation and stability have been paramount; nonetheless, as already outlined, the most current series of research investigations continues to herald the fact that these foundational approaches to institution governance and stability are becoming less and less conducive to accommodating the principles of AI-driven decision-making. Hussein and Mohammadzadeh (2024) highlight the fact that a “collegial” system of governing universities is inclusive but is clearly hindered by being slow and based on consensus. This is further underscored by the exploration introduced by Gadmi et al. (2024) in which it is posited that conventional governing infrastructures are often devoid of the technical skill sets necessary to accommodate the integration of AI.

Decision-making authority is one of the most argued areas in AI-based governance. In this regard, in the context of the discussion carried out in the work of Hussein & Mohammad zadeh (2024) on the application of managerial models, although such approaches contribute to the centralization of authority with potential consequences in terms of leisured decision-making processes, in this context academic participation is not taken into account. In the context of shared governance models, as is strongly indicated in empirical approaches, the issue of coordination and unclear lines of responsibility are more questionably related to the presence of AI-based decision-making processes (Gadmi et al., 2024).

Ethical accountability emerges as a significant theme in all these works of literature that focus on the theme of AI governance other than higher education. Kalkan’s (2024) work on corporate governance provides critical perspectives regarding how AI Governance can further exacerbate current flaws in corporate governance, generating further obscurity, biases, and data privacy challenges. Although this piece of research is conducted in a corporate context, scholars may find these findings extremely relevant to higher education institutions, where there is a need for legitimate decisions with a degree of obscurity and trust.

With regard to HE, ethical governance practices in this context are overseen by committees that were formed for human subjects research, a shortcoming critically discussed by Hine (2021). Hine claims that university ethics committees are structurally narrow and reactive rather than anticipatory in nature, making them incapable of dealing with the downstream effects of data-driven innovation. This study, in addition to those that focus on governance, once again shifts attention to how ethical governance structures themselves are rooted in outdated governance concepts. Because AI technologies eliminate the distinctions between research, administration, and commercial partnerships, the shortcomings of the current ethical governance structures will be visible in due course.

Recent attempts to re-conceptualize these issues take the debate to a new level by espousing new forms of participatory or human-centered modes of governance. In a new framework for the application of analytics in higher educational institutions, Mahajan (2025) emphasizes features such as phased human intelligence, a "participatory ecosystem," and a specific "AI ethical review board." What is noteworthy is that unlike previous critiques, which identified many shortcomings, this one reframes the issue as a co-systemic process.

The necessity for fluid and accommodating governance schemes is also advanced in policy-oriented scholarship. In this regard, Saxena (2024) contends that conventional governance systems fail to effectively balance technological efficiency with human insight, especially in light of algorithmic solutions that seek to eliminate human intermediation as much as possible. These findings echo the human-centric governance tenets advanced by Selvaratnam and Venaruzzo (2024), in which the concept of accessibility, inclusiveness, and well-being are invoked as core governance tenets. Herein lies the shared value that the inflexibility of traditional governance systems, or what has been advanced as traditional governance, has roots in a decision-making paradigm that AI revolutionizes or upends.

Fragmentation of the institutional handling further adds to the complexities of the AI governance of the university setting. According to the study of the adoption of generative AI technologies by McGuirk (2025), the lack of AI governance places the responsibility on the individual educator. This leads to a level of innovation in the adoption of such technologies, which further creates inconsistencies at the level of the university management, as witnessed by the AI governance challenges. This creates the view that the lack of AI governance is not only structural in nature but also strategic, reflecting the absence of a shared institutional vision for AI.

On a broader scope, global perspectives emphasize the worldwide nature of the challenges of governance. According to Roussos et al. (2024), the governance structures of higher education institutions across the globe are trailing the advancements of technology, which affects the application and regulation of AI. Their plea for global collaboration underlines the point that the governance of AI cannot be exclusively viewed through the lens of the local institution, but it also brings up the debate about the global perspectives becoming part of the local practices of governance.

Other areas may offer additional insights into the issue. In clinical decision-making, for example, Giordano et al. (2021) show how AI systems' lack of transparency and data bias impact professional authority and accountability. While specific to healthcare decision-making, the issue is very relevant to professional university settings in relation to admissions, evaluations, and the like. While specific in their application, these issues are very relevant in the university setting.

From this array of research, a number of observations can be made: on one hand, all of these authors recognize a need to move beyond traditional notions of governance within a technology-driven environment, but differ as to precisely how to adjust the system to meet this end. The question left unanswered is how to develop a framework for a newly altered system of governance that incorporates all of these variables, structural adjustment, ethical considerations, and decision-making authority, in a single framework suited to higher learning institutions, setting the stage for our conceptual model to be discussed.

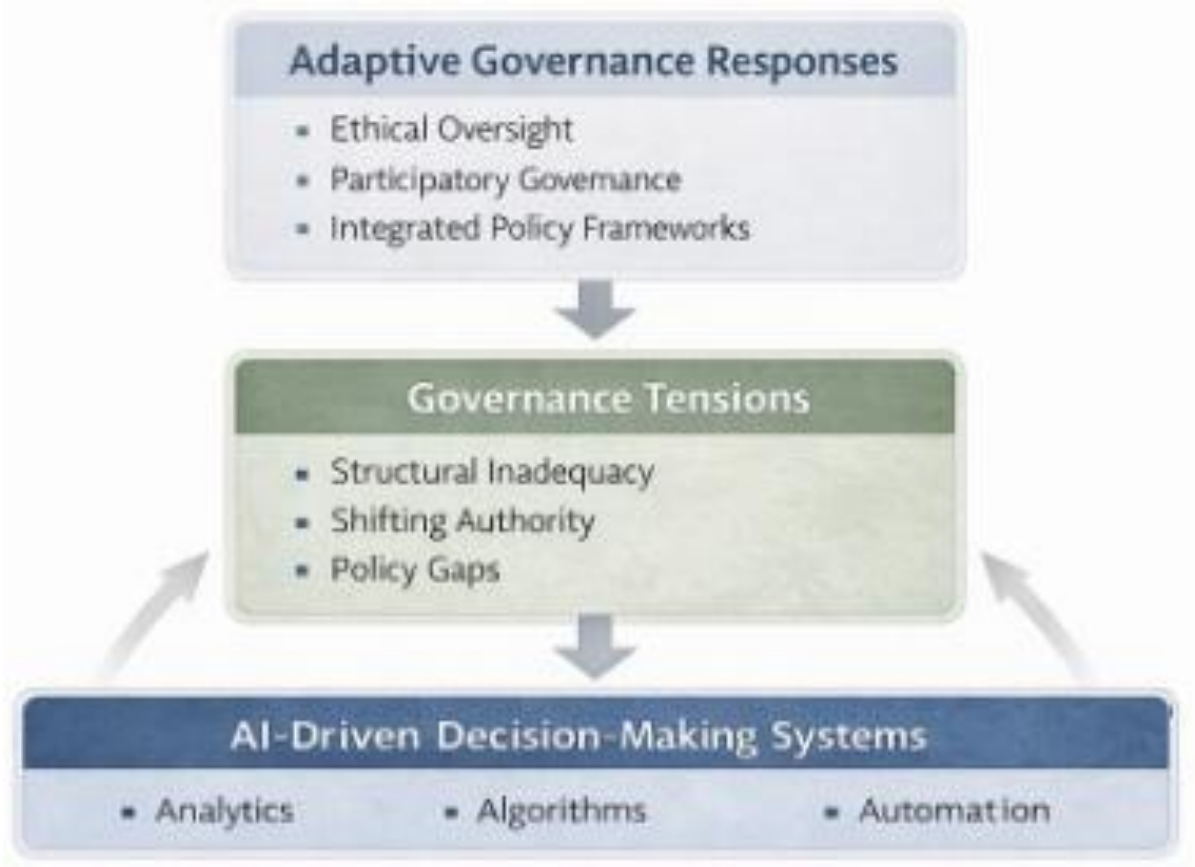

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of university governance in the age of Artificial Intelligence

Source: Developed by the authors.

The figure above outlines a conceptual framework with a layered structure from which the interaction of AI with university governance is displayed: the foundational layer consists of traditional university governance models (collegial, managerial, shared, and network governance), followed by the AI-based decision-making mechanisms in the second layer, and finally the overall tensions in university governance (structural inadequacy, governance rigidity, decision locus flux, and policy gaps) in the third layer, topped with the adaptive university governance mechanisms (ethical oversight mechanisms, participatory governance, and integrative policy models).

This framework visually synthesizes the literature into a meaningful whole: governance challenges in fact do not come from AI alone but from its interaction with pre-existing structures of governance. Through the layering of the model, ethical, structural, and decision-making issues clarify that they are intertwined and not separate matters. The conceptualization herein provides a logical bridge into the next section, dedicated to the proposition of a rethought governance model fully able to align AI integration with core academic values.

This review demonstrates that the existing university governance models fail to accommodate AI-driven decision-making due to their structural inadequacy, rigidity, unclear authority, and persistent policy gaps. While scholars agree on the urgency of reform, the literature remains fragmented across ethical, managerial, and policy perspectives. Crucially, few studies

integrate these dimensions into a unified governance framework adapted to higher education. Addressing this gap is critical for the assurance that AI would enhance rather than undermine transparency, accountability, and academic autonomy. The next section shall develop from these insights an integrated model for rethinking university governance in the age of Artificial Intelligence.

2. Transparent Governance in an Automated Age: Challenges and Solutions in Public Authorities' AI Deployment

The current section will address a particular focus on how the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology within public authorities affects basic principles of governance, particularly addressing themes related to transparency and responsibility. The literature interpreted refers to legal, ethical, and administrative aspects, including potential risks associated with decision-making and aspects related to tackling issues of responsibility. In addressing this potential risk and related aspects of responsibility, potential areas of convergence and separation will be identified as per the regulatory, ethical, and technical strategies addressed within scholarly literature. Additionally, this particular section will illustrate how a particular focus on transparency in relation to AI and decision-making is at the forefront of addressing basic aspects of governance.

The theoretical aspects interpreted within this particular section will lay a platform for addressing this particular topic further within Section 2. AI within the context of public governance has changed the manner of decision-making, oversight, and justification thereof. However, in one of the first studies on the subject, Engstrom and Ho (2020) presented the subtheme of traditional accountability models being defeated by the opaque nature of AI in decision-making.

Algorithmic opacity, characterized by the "black box" phenomenon, is continually cited as the principal barrier to transparent governance. Wang's study (2025) provides compelling evidence of the phenomenon, citing a comparative law approach that examines two jurisdictions: the European Union and Australia. In each case, the author argued that decision-making through automation technologies causes obscurity in the rationale behind particular administrative actions. These findings are echoed in recent work carried out by Cheong (2024), with the author arguing that obscurity impacts not just accountability but also personal and communal wellbeing.

Apart from opacity, another problem that algorithmic bias contributes to the degradation or compromise of fair and transparent governance relates to its potential for undermining the fair treatment of many groups in society through biased decision-making. Sharma (2025), for example, argues how this leads or tends to lead to structural injustices at the expense of fair governance. While Saxena (2024) contributes to the debate through the observation that AI systems have the potential for creating structural inequalities if not addressed through the promotion of fair transparency.

Accountability becomes increasingly complex once decision-making is partially outsourced to machines. According to Liu and Li, responsibility lines among human officials, institutions, and technology providers in autonomous systems blur, raising the basic question of whom to

blame for mistakes or harm. This chimes with Engstrom and Ho's argument that existing models of accountability were designed for human discretion rather than algorithmic mediation. Accountability mechanisms must, therefore, be redefined rather than extended as AI systems progressively become more autonomous.

At the same time, these challenges also prompt many scholars to focus on Explainable Artificial Intelligence, XAI, as one of the possible answers in terms of governance solutions. According to Wang, embedding XAI into an administrative system makes automated decisions understandable, reviewable, and thus legally contestable. Saxena similarly supports explainability as the bridge between technical efficiency and democratic accountability. However, while XAI improves interpretability, the literature equally stresses that technical transparency can only go so far in resolving deeper governance issues.

Legal and regulatory frameworks are increasingly seen as necessary complements to technical solutions. Cheong (2024) emphasizes the need for AI-specific regulations that optimize transparency against various countervailing interests, like privacy and intellectual property. In a related vein, the OECD (2024) identifies a risk-based regulatory model, like the proposed EU AI Act, in setting responsibilities regarding transparency and control. These initiatives mark a transition from voluntary ethics to binding governance mechanisms.

However, it may not be enough with regulation alone without institutional reform. According to Sigfrids et al. (2022), AI governance has to shift from hierarchical to inclusive and adaptive governance models. Their integrative review indicates that stakeholder participation and dialogue can increase transparency and legitimacy, yet simultaneously introduce coordination challenges. This is in line with Sharma's perspective, who calls for human oversight and administrative reform to ensure AI works in favor of democratic values.

Finally, involvement by citizens is proposed as a further means of increasing transparency as well as accountability. Patil et al. (2025) present the idea of citizen-led AI audit platforms as a potential way of operationalizing transparency beyond institutional levels. While still conceptual in nature, there is still a sense of increasing trend in the existing literature regarding participatory governance as a possible solution to considerations around algorithmic transparency.

Despite all the solutions to the issues discussed, the challenge of balancing transparency and other aspects of effective governance persists. Cheong explained that “achieving the highest level of transparency may be inconsistent with data protection, security, and proprietary interests, which imposes trade-offs that must be carefully managed by effective governance.” According to the OECD, “transparency measures must be proportionate to risk, and a 'one size fits all' approach simply is not feasible or desirable.”

Thus, the above literature indicates that while the idea of transparency and accountability in the use of AI in governance is largely agreed upon, the said variables are not necessarily agreed upon in terms of operationalization methods within particular contexts, as the technological, legal, and participative models are mainly dealt with in isolation, indicating the need to develop an integrated governance approach that aligns transparency mechanisms with institutional structures and decision-making processes, a gap that the current study seeks to address.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of transparent governance in the age of AI deployment in public authorities
Source: Developed by the authors.

This figure depicts a six-stage conceptual framework that outlines how artificial intelligence deployment in public authorities creates transparency and accountability issues, as well as how such issues can be resolved through governance solutions.

The foundational level of the framework, with respect to AI in PA, comprises elements such as automated decision systems, algorithms, and data analytics, which play an increasingly critical role in decision-making within administrative authorities. The second level of the framework entails challenges in the realm of governance, which revolve and originate from aspects such as algorithmic opacity, bias, and discriminability.

These problems result in GoG risks, which are presented in the third layer and include issues of transparency, trust, and legitimacy. This framework then provides the solutions to the problems of GoG that have been presented in the literature, including Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI), the law, and ethical auditing.

Finally, at the top of the model, transparent and accountable governance is highlighted as the goal, comprising human oversight, participatory elements, and the development of reliable AI systems. The upward arrows illustrate progressive thinking, which highlights the fact that

governance is not the automatic byproduct of the use of AI but represents the necessary institutional, legal, and ethical interventions.

This framework synthesizes the literature reviewed in Section 2, providing a conceptual bridge for the upcoming section that will embed transparency in a more holistic approach to reform in AI-enabled governance.

The above part has emphasized that the deployment of AI systems by PA organizations raises substantial challenges to transparency and accountability in several vital dimensions, including the transparency of algorithms, the possibility of biases, and unclear responsibility. Despite the variety of possible solutions offered by different researchers, the discussed solutions are mostly separate tools without a clear connection to the creation of a comprehensive framework of PA organization governance. Thus, the implementation of transparency is still irregular and contextual. In the next part, the above findings will be used to create a connection between the reconsideration of PA organization governance systems and the concerns about transparency.

3. Ethics and Public Trust in AI Governance

As Artificial Intelligence is integrated into the governance structure of universities, influencing decision-making, assessment, research, and administrative control, ethical issues and trust in the public eye manifest as foundational principles as opposed to ancillary factors. There is consensus in the scholarly community in recent literature that the governance of Artificial Intelligence in higher educational institutions cannot be based on technical or regulatory effectiveness; rather, it must be based on ethical, transparent, accountable, and-inclusive forms. This segment critically evaluates recent scholarly contributions (2022-2025) pertaining to ethics and trust in Artificial Intelligence governance, with specific reference to the frameworks, roadmaps, or value-infused approaches discussed in the context of higher educational institutions.

Clearly, one of the dominant themes that are consistently emphasized in the literature pertains to the articulation of foundational ethical values that function as the cornerstone for the governance of artificial intelligence. In this context, the works of Ahmad et al. (2024) underscore the imperative of promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity as untouchable values that must function as the cornerstone for the sustenance of public trust in AI Public Institutions.

In the same vein, but through a systematic review informed by the PRISMA protocol, Ismail and Aḥmad (2025) note the persistent ethical themes of fairness, explainability, accountability, and human oversight in the international regimes of AI governance, including the EU AI Act and public sector approaches like the Alan Turing Institute's CARE and ACT frameworks. The overall effect of these studies seems to be that there needs to be principle-based rather than tool-based AI ethical governance in order that institutions can keep pace with the speed of technological change while remaining true to academic values.

Additionally, Mahajan's Human-Driven AI in Higher Education framework (2025) strengthens the arguments advanced within this essay by rejecting automation-centered governance altogether and explaining how a hybrid AI-human model, as advocated by

UNESCO and the OECD and reflecting their ethical standards, places AI as secondary to institutional priorities and judgment.

In addition to ethical guidelines, significant attention is now given in research to institutional governance approaches which have strategic potential to operationalize ethics. Stracke et al. (2025) suggested a strategic AI policy roadmap for higher education institutions. In their approach, a critical narrative review along with the application of sociotechnical systems theory were followed to create structured policy dimensions,scope of AI use, context, technologies involved, and stakeholder roles,to guide universities toward responsible AI adoption.

Complementing the aforementioned strategy, Sigfrids et al. (2022) propose the CIIA framework (Comprehensive, Inclusive, Institutionalized, and Actionable). This framework encourages the development of a new governance paradigm, which abandons the top-down character of traditional governance in favor of more “participatory” and “dialogic” models. This framework also emphasizes the critical role of institutional coordination and inclusion in the context of AI ethics, especially in a complex environment like a university.

So, with reference to regulation, Hannah (2025) proposes that there is a need for blending together these dimensions of ethics, law, and technology, as proposed under the Ethical Regulatory Framework for AI. The latter has developed several loops, namely, ethical review, incentives, penalties, and mechanism improvements.

The issue of public trust appears as a significant outcome variable in the reviewed studies. The link between trust, transparency, and cooperative governance is made by Ahmad et al. (2024), stipulating that opaque AI systems compromise the legitimacy of institutions. Coates et al. (2025) take the discussion a step further by including the issue of academic integrity and governance indicators and reforms in policies, people, and technology related to the authenticity of research in the age of generative AI.

Notably, various studies emphasize the need for stakeholder engagement in the promotion of effective trust-building. This includes inclusive models of governance, in which the interests and views of the student, educator, administrator, and even external regulator are represented in efforts aimed at reducing any potential biases, making the system more accountable, and ensuring alignment with education values (Ismail & Aḥmad, 2025; Sigfrids et al.,).

Another layer of depth is added to the discourse by the regional perspectives. For instance, Sangwa et al. (2025) put forward a three-year roadmap for AI governance in African higher education settings that is guided by Ubuntu ethics and Diffusion of Innovation Theory. This contribution highlights the need for contextualized AI governance, as opposed to generic models.

In all methodologies, bibliometric analysis, systematic reviews, narrative synthesis, and case studies, the literature converges to a single finding,Ethical AI Governance cannot be disassociated from public trust, ethical principles need to be reflected in structures, instruments, or processes, which are transparent, accountable, and include human control. However, it also indicates that where the focus of these researched works is concerned, there exist prevailing tensions and challenges such as innovation and regulation, automation and human intervention, and efficiency and inclusiveness.

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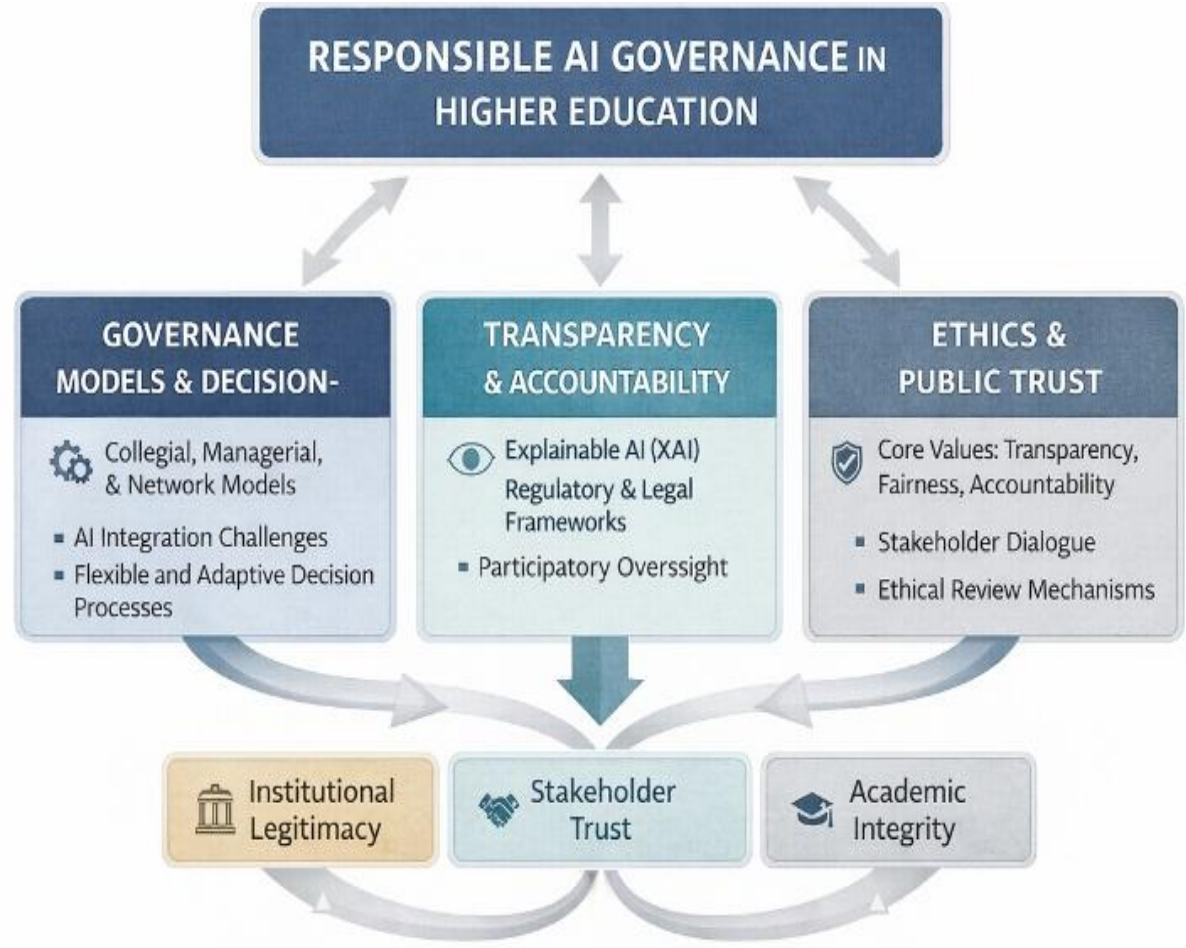

Figure 3. synthesizes the literature on ethics and public trust in AI governance, illustrating how ethical principles are operationalized through governance frameworks and mechanisms to produce trustworthy outcomes in higher education.
Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 3 above displays a conceptual model portraying the dynamic relationship between ethical principles, governance frameworks, governance mechanisms, and public trust in the context of AI-enabled higher education institutions. At the foundational level, the norms for decision-making in the context of AI governance in higher education comprise ethical values relating to transparency, accountability, equity, and inclusiveness. They are realized at the institutional level by the applicable governance frameworks.
Through human oversight, explainable AI, ethical audit, and stakeholder engagement, governance mechanisms operationalize the above themes and frameworks. The effective deployment of AI will result in principal outcomes such as trust, legitimacy, academic integrity, and community acceptance of AI systems or applications. The feedback loop underscores the malleable and dynamic nature of AI governance as a continuous cycle of monitoring, dialogue, and policy updates in response to system threats and changes in AI technologies.

This part of the text has proven that issues related to ethics and trust in the context of Artificial Intelligence in governance in higher education cannot be treated as secondary in importance. The above-stated issue is concerned with the fact that the literature allows for the assertion that a successful Artificial Intelligence governance framework is one which is institutionally embedded, ensuring that technological innovation does not undermine academic integrity, social legitimacy, or human agency.

From bibliometric analysis to systematic reviews, narrative synthesis, and case studies, scholars underline that the ethical foundation upon which trustworthy AI governance is built entails transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and human oversight. Governance frameworks and policy roadmaps ensure the translation of these values into institutional practices through tangible mechanisms such as ethics audits, explainable AI systems, stakeholder participation, and dedicated governance structures.

Importantly, the literature underlines that public trust is not an outcome per se, but a dynamic process to be constantly nurtured through monitoring, feedback, and adaptation. It follows that universities would need to adopt flexible and participatory forms of governance that respond to evolving ethical, legal, and technological challenges. This ethical–trust nexus plays a key conceptual role in developing the argument in the second section of the paper, where an integrated model for rethinking university governance in the age of Artificial Intelligence is advanced.

Conclusion

This review has shown that, far from being merely a functional phenomenon in the governance of higher education, artificial intelligence has a systemic effect, including in the areas of authority, accountability, and legitimacy. Indeed, across the literature, there is a persistent finding that traditional governance models in the university context fail to accommodate AI-driven governance due to issues of structural inflexibility, shared governance, and weak ethical and regulatory standards, amongst other difficulties that AI typically creates.

In the analysis of transparency and accountability, it is evident that AI systems have the potential to both enhance and impair the quality of governance. There is a marked emphasis on the idea that automated systems are essential, yet the "black box" problem is seen to be detrimental to the idea of "explainability" as such. There is emerging agreement on the idea of "explainable" systems as an essential feature within the world of governance, along with the overall concept of "inclusive" systems of governance. Transparency is not simply an idea but, rather, it is constituted within the structure of governance as such, according to the literature on accountability and transparency.

As can be observed within the studies reviewed, the unifying thread regarding ethics and the trust of the public can be situated as the overarching concept under which AI governance within the academe can be understood. Specifically, the studies reviewed underlined the point that it is not merely through the utilization of specific technologies that a sense of trust can be made to endure, but rather through the value-driven approach to governance that highlights

the importance of aspects such as transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness, among others.

Although such understandings have been gained, there remain profound gaps in our understanding. There is, for instance, a lack of research evidence about the ways in which universities make AI governance tangible, both within and across different contexts. Future research in this specific area needs to look beyond the various frameworks that have already been created.

In conclusion, the reconsidering of university governance in the era of artificial intelligence necessitates the formulation of an integrated thought that ties together the models of governance, the models of transparency, and the models of ethics. Thus, the rewards of artificial intelligence can be leveraged while upholding university integrity, academic legitimacy, and trust.

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