Responsible AI Governance for Student-Centred Digital Transformation in Higher Education

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Abstract: The digitalisation of higher education as well as the recent advances in generative and agentic artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming teaching and learning, academic leadership, institutional governance and student support services. AI-enabled technologies provide opportunities to personalise learning, improve educational decision-making, enhance administrative efficiency and foster innovation across universities. However, their widespread adoption also raises concerns regarding their algorithms' transparency, explainability, fairness, accountability, privacy, academic integrity and stakeholder trust. Consequently, responsible AI governance is emerging as a strategic institutional capability that facilitates student-centred digital transformation while safeguarding ethical, educational and societal values. This conceptual paper examines how responsible AI governance can support higher education institutions in fostering digital transformation within an increasingly complex technological and regulatory environment. Building on recent advances in AI governance and explainable artificial intelligence (XAI), it proposes a conceptual framework that integrates governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities to promote transparent, trustworthy and student-centred AI adoption. The framework synthesises principles of ethical oversight, algorithmic transparency, explainability, risk management, regulatory compliance, stakeholder engagement, human oversight, and continuous evaluation. It argues that explainability should be regarded as an institutional capability that empowers educators, supports informed student engagement, strengthens academic decision-making and reinforces institutional legitimacy. The proposed framework demonstrates how responsible AI governance can enhance strategic alignment, organisational learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, knowledge sharing and digital resilience while supporting equitable educational innovation. It also considers the implications of AI for curriculum design, assessment, student engagement, academic work and human-AI collaboration. This contribution extends the literature on responsible AI in a higher educational context. It offers practical guidance for university leaders, educators, policymakers and quality assurance bodies who are seeking to implement trustworthy AI systems that strengthen institutional effectiveness and promote student-centred digital transformation. Therefore, it supports the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) by advancing responsible AI governance and digital innovation in higher education.

Keywords: Responsible AI governance, Generative AI, Agentic AI, Higher education, Explainable artificial intelligence (XAI), Student-centred learning

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are experiencing rapid digital transformation as advances in generative and agentic artificial intelligence (AI) are supporting teaching, learning and research activities, as well as institutional governance and student support services (Slimi et al., 2023). AI-enabled technologies provide opportunities to personalise learning, improve educational decision-making, automate administrative processes and enhance institutional effectiveness (Fu and Weng, 2024). However, their widespread adoption also raises important concerns regarding transparency, explainability, fairness, accountability, privacy, academic integrity and stakeholder trust (Nguyen, 2025). These challenges have increased the need for responsible AI governance that enables universities to adopt AI in ways that are ethically sound, legally compliant and aligned with their educational missions Aler (Tubella et al., 2024).

Recent studies have explored responsible AI, explainable artificial intelligence (XAI) and AI governance from technical, organisational and educational perspectives (Barus et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the literature remains fragmented, with much of the existing work focusing on individual governance principles or specific AI applications rather than providing an integrated institutional perspective (Camilleri, 2026). Moreover, the latest evolution of generative and agentic AI has introduced new governance challenges that require universities to develop institutional capabilities capable of supporting trustworthy and student-centred AI adoption (Wu et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a need to consolidate the emerging evidence and to develop a comprehensive framework that links governance mechanisms with higher education institutions' strategic objectives.

This paper examines how responsible AI governance can facilitate student-centred digital transformation in higher education. Specifically, it aims to: (i) synthesise recent literature on responsible AI governance in higher education; (ii) identify the principal governance mechanisms, institutional capabilities and recurring research themes emerging from contemporary studies; (iii) develop a novel conceptual framework that explains the

relationship between responsible AI governance and institutional capability development; and (iv) propose implications for practice together with future research directions. To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a systematic literature review methodology. It analyses thirty of the most cited scholarly articles published during the past four years, thereby capturing influential and contemporary contributions in this rapidly evolving field. The review synthesises existing knowledge, identifies common themes and highlights research gaps that inform the development of a conceptual model. The proposed framework integrates governance mechanisms, including ethical oversight, algorithmic transparency, explainability, risk management, regulatory compliance, stakeholder engagement, human oversight and continuous evaluation, with institutional capabilities that support trustworthy AI adoption and sustainable digital transformation.

This paper adds value to the extant literature in several ways. It provides a timely synthesis of recent research on responsible AI governance in higher education and advances a novel conceptual framework that positions explainability as an institutional capability that supports informed decision-making, stakeholder trust and organisational learning. By connecting governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities, the framework extends existing research beyond technology-focused perspectives and offers a holistic understanding of responsible AI implementation within universities. This contribution concludes by discussing implications for academia, higher education leaders, practitioners and policymakers, while identifying future research directions that can further advance responsible AI governance and student-centred digital transformation in higher education.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology to identify, evaluate and synthesise contemporary research on responsible artificial intelligence (AI) governance in higher education. The review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, consistency and reproducibility throughout the identification, screening and selection of the literature, while minimising selection bias (Moher et al., 2009). The Scopus database was selected as the primary source of scholarly publications because of its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals across the fields of education, information systems, computer science, management and public policy. It was considered particularly appropriate for capturing recent interdisciplinary research relating to responsible AI, AI governance and higher education.

The initial search was conducted within article titles, abstracts and keywords by using the following search query: **TITLE-ABS-KEY ("responsible AI" OR "AI governance" AND "higher education")**. This search retrieved **383** publications. To improve relevance and ensure the inclusion of the latest, peer-reviewed, high impact research, the search was refined by restricting the results to journal articles and review papers published in English between **2023 and 2026**. Hence, the advanced search query was: **TITLE-ABS-KEY ("responsible AI" OR "AI governance" AND "higher education") AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"re")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"English")) AND PUBYEAR > 2022 AND PUBYEAR < 2027**. The refined search yielded **227** publications. To identify the most influential contributions in this rapidly evolving field, the retrieved records were ranked according to citation counts. Thirty (30) of the most-cited publications were subsequently selected for detailed full-text analysis. Table 1 summarises the research objectives and methodologies of these publications included in the systematic literature review.

Table 1: An overview of the research objectives and methodological approaches of the most-cited publications

Publication	Research objective	Methodology
Abuzar et al. (2025)	Examine students' trust, AI reliance and critical engagement strategies.	Mixed methods
Acosta-Enriquez et al. (2025)	Identify factors influencing researchers' adoption of AI models in academia.	Quantitative survey
Aler Tubella et al. (2024)	Review approaches for teaching responsible AI in higher education.	Literature review
Alhur et al. (2025)	Explore educators' dependence on AI in medical higher education.	Qualitative interviews

Publication	Research objective	Methodology
Barrientos et al. (2024)	Investigate students' perceptions of generative AI and academic integrity.	Exploratory qualitative
Barus et al. (2025)	Explore students' perceptions of generative AI governance in universities.	Mixed methods
Fu and Weng (2024)	Synthesize responsible human-centred AI practices in education.	Systematic review
Gavira Durón and Jiménez-Preciado (2025)	Analyse AI research trends in higher education.	NLP analysis
Hamamra et al. (2026)	Examine educators' experiences integrating AI in Palestinian universities.	Phenomenological study
Jia, Pan and Neary (2025)	Examine effects of GenAI dependency on students' achievement and self-efficacy.	Quantitative survey
Kanont et al. (2024)	Identify factors influencing Thai students' adoption of Generative AI.	SEM survey
Kazimova et al. (2025)	Review AI applications and benefits in university education.	Systematic review
Khan et al. (2025)	Examine AI's role in sustainable higher education transformation.	Case studies
Lo and Chan (2025)	Investigate Hong Kong students' perceptions of AI in higher education.	Questionnaire survey
Malik et al. (2025)	Explore opportunities and challenges of conversational AI in higher education.	Semi-structured interviews
Nguyen (2025)	Examine ethical and pedagogical principles for AI integration in higher education.	Literature review
Nurtanto et al. (2025)	Identify determinants of AI use intention and learning performance.	SEM survey
Oncioiu and Bularca (2025)	Examine knowledge management's role in responsible AI awareness.	Quantitative survey
Parker et al. (2025)	Compare AI governance policies across leading universities worldwide.	Comparative policy analysis
Reiter et al. (2025)	Investigate responsible AI adoption for institutional decision-making.	Case study

Publication	Research objective	Methodology
Richter et al. (2025)	Assess AI literacy needs among higher education stakeholders.	Mixed methods
Schei et al. (2024)	Explore students' attitudes towards generative AI in higher education.	Qualitative interviews
Slimi and Carballido (2023)	Review opportunities, risks and governance of ChatGPT in higher education.	Literature review
Sousa and Cardoso (2025)	Examine ethical governance practices for AI-enabled higher education.	Conceptual analysis
Valdivieso and Gonzalez (2025)	Examine AI competencies required for responsible educational practice.	Systematic review
Werdiningsih et al. (2024)	Investigate students' acceptance and ethical concerns regarding generative AI.	Quantitative survey
Wu et al. (2024)	Develop institutional AI governance framework for universities.	Conceptual framework
Yan et al. (2025)	Examine human-centred governance for responsible AI integration.	Conceptual analysis
Zawacki-Richter et al. (2025)	Synthesize responsible AI research and future directions in higher education.	Systematic review

Note: These citations are arranged alphabetically by the first author's surname.

The selected studies were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach. Recurring concepts, governance mechanisms and institutional capabilities were identified and grouped into higher-order themes. The analysis revealed several prominent areas of investigation, including ethical AI governance and institutional oversight, transparency and explainable AI, accountability and regulatory compliance, privacy and data governance, academic integrity and trustworthy AI, stakeholder engagement and human oversight, as well as AI-enabled digital transformation and institutional capability development. These themes informed the development of a novel conceptual framework that integrates responsible AI governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities to facilitate transparent, trustworthy and student-centred digital transformation in higher education. Finally, the framework provides the foundation for discussing theoretical implications, practical recommendations for university leaders and policymakers, as well as future research directions.

3. Results and Discussion

The systematic review indicates that responsible AI governance has rapidly emerged as a multidisciplinary research area that extends beyond the technical implementation of artificial intelligence to encompass institutional, pedagogical, ethical and regulatory considerations (Slimi and Carballido, 2023). Across the reviewed studies, a common consensus is that AI has considerable potential to transform higher education by

enhancing personalised learning (Hamamra et al., 2026; Kazimova et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025), supporting academic decision-making (Mahrishi et al., 2025; Nurtanto et al., 2025; Reiter et al., 2025), improving assessment practices (Acosta et al., 2025; Alhur et al., 2025; Hamamra et al., 2026) and increasing institutional efficiency (Fun and Weng, 2024; Kanont et al., 2024; Schei et al. 2024). At the same time, researchers consistently emphasise that these benefits can only be realised through robust governance mechanisms that promote transparency, accountability and responsible AI adoption (Malik et al., 2025; Sousa and Cardoso, 2025; Werdiningsih et al., 2024).

Several recurring themes emerged from the literature. The first concerns **ethical AI governance**, with studies highlighting the need for institutional policies that address fairness, bias, transparency, accountability and privacy while safeguarding academic integrity and stakeholder trust (e.g., Aler Tubella et al., 2024; Camilleri, 2024; Slimi and Carballido, 2023; Yan et al., 2025). Closely related is the growing emphasis on **AI governance frameworks**, where scholars advocate formal governance structures, institutional guidelines and continuous oversight to regulate the responsible deployment of AI technologies within universities (Barus et al., 2025; Oncioiu and Bularca, 2025; Wu et al., 2024). A second prominent theme focuses on **teaching, learning and assessment**. The reviewed studies demonstrate how generative AI can personalise learning, enhance feedback, support curriculum design and improve assessment, while simultaneously creating challenges associated with academic misconduct, authenticity and excessive dependency on AI systems (Ilieva et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025; Malik et al., 2025; Nadim and Di Fuccio, 2025). Consequently, several authors argue that AI should augment, rather than replace, human judgement and pedagogical practice (Oncioiu and Bularca, 2025; Yan et al., 2025). The literature also identifies **AI literacy** (Fu and Weng, 2024; Richter et al., 2025; Valdivieso and Gonzalez, 2025) **and institutional capability development** (Ilieva et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025; Malik et al., 2025) as essential prerequisites for responsible adoption. Universities are encouraged to invest in educator and student competencies, professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge-sharing practices that enable informed and ethical AI use (Aler Tubella et al., 2024; Kelley and Wenzel, 2025; Oncioiu and Bularca, 2025). Complementing this perspective, studies on **student perceptions and technology acceptance** demonstrate generally positive attitudes towards generative AI, although concerns regarding reliability, ethical use, authenticity and critical thinking remain significant (Kanont et al., 2024; Schei et al., 2024; Sousa and Cardoso, 2025; Werdiningsih et al., 2024).

In sum, the review reveals that existing research has primarily examined governance mechanisms, ethical principles and AI adoption from individual or application-specific perspectives. Comparatively limited attention has been given to integrating these elements into a holistic institutional governance model. This knowledge gap provides the rationale for advancing a novel conceptual framework, which links responsible AI governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities to support trustworthy, student-centred digital transformation in higher education.

Figure 1 illustrates that responsible AI governance should be viewed as an integrated institutional system rather than a collection of isolated policies or technical controls. The model proposes that governance mechanisms form the foundation upon which higher education institutions develop organisational capabilities that ultimately improve educational outcomes and strengthen digital transformation. The framework positions it as an enabling capability that supports innovation while reducing ethical, legal and operational risks (Wu et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2025). In plain words, the first layer of the framework consists of governance mechanisms, including ethical oversight, algorithmic transparency, explainability, risk management, regulatory compliance, stakeholder engagement, human oversight and continuous evaluation. These mechanisms are closely interconnected and should operate collectively. For example, transparency allows stakeholders to understand how AI systems reach their outputs, while explainability provides meaningful reasons for those outputs, by enabling educators and students to challenge or verify AI-generated recommendations when necessary (Nguyen, 2025; Sousa and Cardoso, 2025). Similarly, continuous evaluation enables universities to monitor AI performance over time. This ensures that systems remain accurate, fair and aligned with institutional values, as technologies and educational requirements evolve (Reiter et al., 2025).

The second layer of the framework focuses on institutional capabilities that emerge from effective governance. The reviewed studies indicate that universities require capabilities that extend beyond technological infrastructure. These include AI literacy among staff and students, interdisciplinary collaboration, knowledge-sharing practices, organisational learning and strategic leadership (Fu and Weng, 2024; Richter et al., 2025; Valdivieso and Gonzalez, 2025). Institutions that invest in these capabilities are better positioned to critically

evaluate AI systems, introduce appropriate governance policies and respond to emerging technological developments. This perspective is consistent with recent research that suggests that responsible AI adoption depends on organisational readiness, human competencies as well as on technical performance (Khan et al., 2025; Malik et al., 2025).

An important contribution of the proposed model is its emphasis on explainability as an institutional capability (Camilleri, 2026), rather than solely as a technical characteristic of AI systems. Although explainable AI has traditionally focused on making algorithms more interpretable, the literature increasingly suggests that universities must also develop organisational processes that enable educators, administrators and students to understand, question and appropriately use AI-generated information (Barus et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025). In this context, explainability supports informed decision-making, strengthens accountability and increases stakeholder confidence in AI-assisted educational practices. The framework also highlights the dynamic relationship between governance and student-centred digital transformation. Effective governance contributes to improved teaching, assessment, student support services and administrative decision-making by ensuring that AI technologies are implemented responsibly. At the same time, successful AI implementation generates organisational learning that can inform future governance improvements through continuous monitoring and stakeholder feedback. This feedback loop reflects the iterative nature of responsible AI governance, where policies and institutional practices are regularly refined as mature technologies and new ethical and/or regulatory challenges emerge (Slimi and Carballido, 2023; Oncioiu and Bularca, 2025).

In a nutshell, Figure 1 demonstrates that responsible AI governance should be regarded as a strategic institutional capability that links the governance principles with organisational development and educational outcomes. The integration of governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities, provide a practical roadmap for universities to implement trustworthy AI while maintaining transparency, accountability, academic integrity and student-centred innovation (Aler Tubella et al., 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2025).

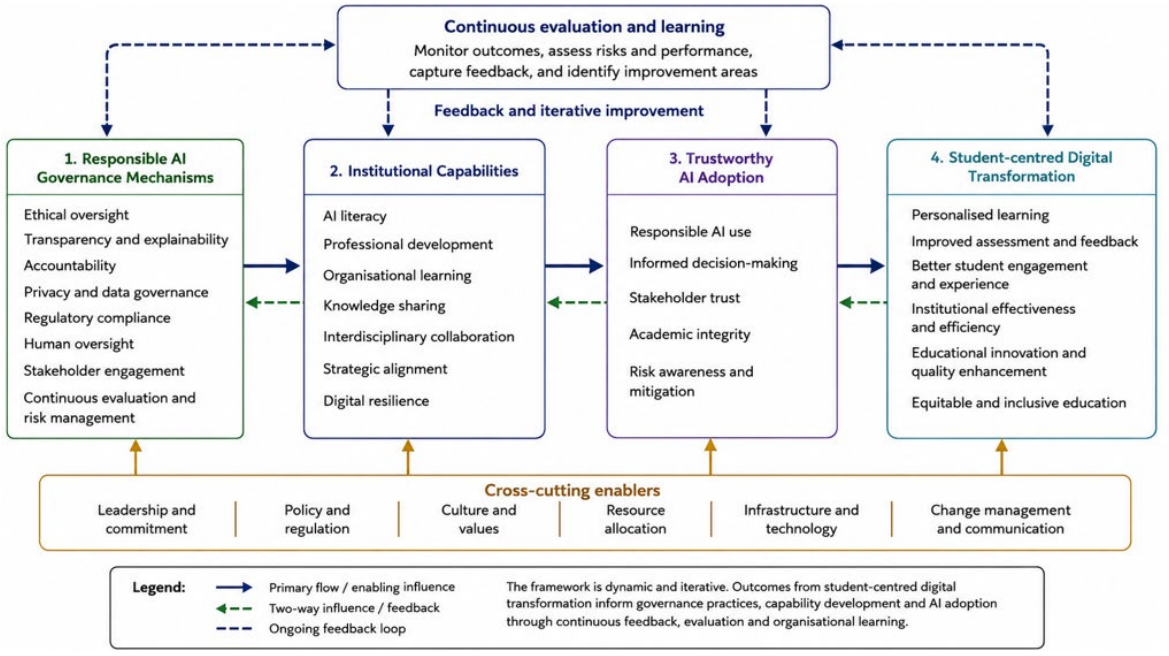


Figure 1: Responsible AI governance for student centred learning outcomes

4. Conclusions

This paper has examined the growing importance of responsible AI governance in supporting student-centred digital transformation within higher education institutions. The systematic review identified thirty of the most-cited publications on responsible AI governance in higher education published between 2023 and 2026; it synthesised their content, shed light on the main themes of study that emerged from the extant literature and advanced a conceptual framework that integrates governance mechanisms with institutional capabilities. The proposed framework demonstrates that responsible AI governance extends beyond regulatory compliance and

technical implementation. It positions AI governance as a strategic institutional capability that enables universities to adopt trustworthy AI while safeguarding educational, ethical and societal values.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the academic literature by consolidating fragmented research on responsible AI governance within higher education into a coherent conceptual model. It advances existing scholarship by linking governance mechanisms including ethical oversight, transparency, explainability, accountability, stakeholder engagement, human oversight and continuous evaluation with institutional capabilities that promote organisational learning, digital resilience and informed decision-making. Furthermore, the framework positions explainability as an institutional capability that strengthens trust, supports responsible AI adoption and reinforces institutional legitimacy. The study also offers practical implications for higher education leaders, educators, policymakers and quality assurance bodies. Universities should move beyond isolated AI initiatives and establish institution-wide governance structures supported by clear policies, ethical guidelines and continuous evaluation mechanisms. Investment in AI literacy, professional development and stakeholder engagement will be essential to ensure that educators and students can use AI responsibly and effectively. The framework may also assist policymakers and accreditation bodies in developing governance standards that encourage innovation while maintaining transparency, accountability and academic integrity.

Despite these contributions, the study has its limitations. The systematic review was restricted to publications indexed in the Scopus database, written in English and published between 2023 and 2026. In addition, the analysis focused on thirty of the most-cited publications, which may have excluded recent studies that have not yet accumulated substantial citation counts. As a conceptual study, the proposed framework has not been empirically validated, as yet, therefore it should be regarded as a foundation for future investigation. Future research should empirically examine the proposed framework across different higher education contexts using qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches. Comparative studies involving institutions from different countries and educational systems could provide further insights into contextual differences in responsible AI governance. Researchers may also investigate how governance capabilities influence institutional performance, student outcomes, trust and AI adoption over time. Finally, as generative and agentic AI technologies continue to evolve, future studies should examine how governance frameworks can remain adaptive, transparent and resilient within rapidly changing technological and regulatory environments.

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Ethics Declaration: Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee, on 9th July 2026 (Ref: MAKS-2026-00108), before undertaking the literature review.

AI Declaration: The author used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools exclusively for language editing rather than for generating scientific content.

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