



Artificial Intelligence and Educational Leadership: Policy Implications for Higher Education in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) across higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa is fundamentally reshaping the expectations, competencies, and responsibilities of educational leaders. While AI offers transformative possibilities -- from personalized learning and administrative efficiency to evidence-based governance -- its responsible integration demands proactive, contextually grounded leadership and robust institutional policy frameworks. This article examines the intersection of AI adoption and educational leadership in African higher education, with a particular focus on the policy implications for university administrators, academic managers, and national policymakers. Drawing on a systematic review of more than fifty peer-reviewed sources, policy documents, and practitioner reports, the authors argue that effective AI governance in African HEIs requires leaders who possess not merely technical awareness but deep competencies in digital ethics, epistemic justice, equity-centred decision-making, and transformational change management. The article identifies critical policy gaps at both institutional and national levels, analyses the risk of digital colonialism embedded in uncritical AI adoption, and advances a comprehensive framework for AI-responsive educational leadership tailored to the African context. Special attention is given to academic integrity, faculty capacity building, data sovereignty, and the imperative to foreground African knowledge systems in AI-mediated educational environments. The article contributes original theoretical and applied insights to the growing field of AI in African higher education, and provides actionable recommendations for leaders navigating this complex terrain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence as a dominant force in the organisation and delivery of higher education represents one of the most consequential shifts in the history of modern universities. Across the world, AI technologies -- encompassing machine learning, natural language processing, predictive analytics, adaptive learning systems, and intelligent automation -- are reshaping how universities teach, assess, administer, and govern (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2022). For African higher education institutions (HEIs), this moment is simultaneously one of profound opportunity and acute risk. The opportunity lies in the potential of AI to address longstanding structural deficiencies: inadequate administrative capacity, large and growing student populations, constrained faculty resources, limited research infrastructure, and persistent inequalities in access and outcomes (Chisom et al., 2024; Guadu et al., 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025). The risk lies in the prospect that AI, adopted uncritically and without appropriate governance, will reproduce and amplify these very inequalities while embedding new forms of epistemic and technological dependency on Global North knowledge systems and technology corporations (Woldegiorgis, 2026; Maimela & Mbonde, 2025; Soko, 2025).

At the centre of this moment stands the figure of the educational leader. Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, and the full range of senior academic managers in African HEIs are increasingly called upon to make high-stakes decisions about AI: which tools to adopt, how to govern their use, how to build institutional capacity for responsible deployment, and how to ensure that AI serves the equity and epistemic commitments of African education rather than undermining them. These are not merely technical decisions. They are leadership decisions of the highest order, demanding integrations of strategic vision, ethical reasoning, community accountability, and contextual knowledge that go far beyond familiarity with any particular technology (Maluleke, 2025; Maina & Kuria, 2024; Hlongwane et al., 2024).

Yet the scholarly literature reveals that most African educational leaders are navigating this terrain without adequate policy frameworks, institutional guidance, or professional development support. Cudjoe and Adebayo (2025) find that the majority of sub-Saharan African HEIs lack formal AI policies. Angwaomadoko (2025) documents the reliance on ad hoc judgements and individual faculty discretion in the absence of institutional guidance. Mabanja et al. (2025) identify a pervasive leadership capacity gap in AI governance across East African universities. These findings collectively point to a critical alignment problem: the pace of AI diffusion is dramatically outrunning the development of the leadership frameworks and policy infrastructure needed to govern it responsibly.

This article addresses that gap. It examines the role of educational leadership in shaping AI

governance in African HEIs, analyses the policy landscape at institutional and national levels, and advances a framework for AI-responsive educational leadership suited to the African context. The analysis draws on a systematic review of the empirical and theoretical literature, augmented by the authors own scholarship on educational inequality, governance, and community-based approaches to institutional change in African contexts (Sele & Mukundi, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2025). Section 2 establishes the theoretical relationship between educational leadership and AI governance. Section 3 surveys the AI adoption landscape in African HEIs. Section 4 analyses the policy environment at national and institutional levels. Section 5 examines the ethical and equity dimensions that leaders must navigate. Section 6 addresses faculty development and organisational capacity. Section 7 proposes a framework for AI-responsive educational leadership. Section 8 offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Educational Leadership and AI Governance: Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Transformational Leadership in the Age of AI

The relationship between educational leadership and institutional technology adoption is well established in the broader literature on higher education management. Leadership frameworks -- from transformational and distributed models to servant and collaborative governance approaches -- consistently identify senior leadership commitment as the critical variable determining whether institutional innovations are successfully embedded or superficially adopted and subsequently abandoned (Maluleke, 2025; Maina & Kuria, 2024). In the specific context of AI governance, this leadership imperative takes on heightened significance, because AI is not a single, discrete tool but a pervasive technological paradigm that touches every dimension of university life: curriculum design, student assessment, administrative workflow, research practice, financial management, and student welfare.

Transformational leadership theory, which emphasises the leader capacity to inspire shared vision, challenge existing assumptions, and facilitate collective learning (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006), provides a productive theoretical frame for understanding what AI-responsive educational leadership requires. An educational leader who approaches AI governance transformationally does not merely manage the compliance dimensions of AI policy -- ensuring that staff follow rules and that legal risks are managed -- but actively shapes the institutional culture, values, and capacities that determine how AI is understood and used across the organisation. Maluleke (2025) argues explicitly that AI adoption in African HEIs is fundamentally a leadership challenge, not a technical one, and that the most important determinant of beneficial AI outcomes is the quality of

institutional leadership and its commitment to equity-centred governance.

2.2 Distributed Leadership and AI Policy Co-Creation

Alongside transformational models, distributed leadership theory offers an important corrective to leader-centric accounts of AI governance. Effective AI governance in complex organisations like universities cannot be the exclusive responsibility of senior management: it requires the active engagement of academic staff, professional services staff, students, and -- in the African context -- community stakeholders whose interests are directly affected by institutional AI decisions (Chisom et al., 2024; Woldegiorgis, 2026). Sele and Mukundi (2024d) argue that the legitimacy and sustainability of governance frameworks depends fundamentally on whether diverse community voices have been authentically engaged in their development -- a principle that applies with direct force to the co-creation of institutional AI policies.

The emerging literature on participatory AI governance in higher education suggests that the most resilient and contextually appropriate AI governance frameworks are those developed through genuine consultation with the communities they govern, rather than adopted wholesale from Global North policy models or imported through the contractual requirements of technology vendors (Thaldar et al., 2025; Matto & Ponera, 2025; Soko, 2025). This has direct implications for the role of educational leaders: they must function as facilitators of participatory governance processes, not merely as issuers of institutional directives.

2.3 Leadership Competencies for AI Governance

What specific competencies do educational leaders need to govern AI responsibly in the African higher education context? The literature points to several interconnected domains. Digital intelligence -- the capacity to understand AI tools, their capabilities, their limitations, and their risks -- is a prerequisite, though the literature carefully distinguishes this from narrow technical expertise: educational leaders do not need to be AI engineers, but they do need sufficient understanding to exercise meaningful oversight of AI-related decisions (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Hlongwane et al., 2024; Oguntona & Emere, 2025). Ethical reasoning is equally critical: AI governance decisions are invariably ethical decisions, involving trade-offs between efficiency and equity, between institutional benefit and individual privacy, and between innovation and academic integrity (Ayandibu, 2024; Guadu et al., 2025; Funda & Mbangeleli, 2024).

Change management competence is a third critical domain. The introduction of AI-native platforms and AI-mediated processes into universities that may have operated with legacy paper-based or early digital systems for decades constitutes a major organisational change, with all the resistance, uncertainty, and institutional friction that major change typically generates. Leaders who understand change

management -- who can create safety for experimentation, communicate the rationale for change compellingly, and support staff through transitions -- will produce very different AI governance outcomes than those who treat technology adoption as a procurement and compliance exercise (Ahmed et al., 2025; Maimela & Mbonde, 2025). Sele and Mukundi (2024b) have argued that genuinely transformative leadership requires the capacity to ground institutional decisions in African philosophical and ethical traditions, not merely to transpose external frameworks onto local contexts.

3. AI Adoption in African Higher Education: Opportunities and State of the Field

3.1 The Scope and Scale of AI Adoption

AI adoption in African higher education is no longer a marginal or prospective phenomenon: it is a present reality, accelerating rapidly, and deeply uneven in its distribution. Empirical reviews consistently document that students and faculty across the continent are actively using AI tools -- primarily large language models such as ChatGPT and Gemini -- for learning, research, and administrative purposes, typically far ahead of any formal institutional policies governing such use (Rugeiyamu et al., 2026; Cudjoe & Adebayo, 2025; Matto & Ponera, 2025). The Africa-wide e-learning market was estimated at USD 3.4 billion in 2024, projected to grow to USD 7.7 billion by 2033 (DigitalDefynd, 2025). The broader AI market in Africa reached USD 4.51 billion in 2025, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 27.42%, with projections of 230 million digital sector jobs in sub-Saharan Africa alone stemming from this growth trajectory (Mastercard, 2025).

Guadu et al. (2025) document a wide range of AI applications across Ethiopian and East African HEIs, encompassing intelligent tutoring systems, automated assessment, AI-assisted research analysis, and administrative automation. Ahmed et al. (2025), reviewing five years of AI in African education, identify personalised learning, faculty productivity support, and institutional management as the three domains of greatest AI impact. Oguntona and Emere (2025) map the landscape of AI in teaching and learning across African HEIs, finding rapid uptake alongside significant institutional variation in governance readiness. The United Nations University (2025) convened a thematic event specifically on AI and higher education in Africa, signalling continental recognition of the policy urgency at stake.

3.2 Benefits for Teaching, Learning, and Institutional Governance

The evidence on pedagogical and access benefits of AI in African HEIs is broadly positive, provided adoption is contextualised and governed appropriately. Chisom et al. (2024) demonstrate that AI tools can substantially enhance personalised learning, adaptive assessment, and student engagement. Matto and

Ponera (2025) find significant potential for AI to improve teaching quality and administrative efficiency in Tanzanian universities with constrained staffing. Opesemowo and Adekomaya (2024) argue that AI can advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 in South African higher education by improving retention and completion rates among previously disadvantaged students through targeted early-warning and intervention systems. For institutional governance, AI offers compelling tools for evidence-based decision-making, resource allocation optimisation, and student success prediction (Hlongwane et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025).

For access and inclusion, AI presents particular promise in the African context. Virtual learning capabilities can extend quality education to geographically remote communities, AI-powered translation can partially bridge the gap between colonial languages of instruction and students home languages, and mobile-first AI learning applications can serve students whose primary device is a smartphone rather than a laptop (Patel & Ragolane, 2024; Rugeiyamu et al., 2026; Angwaomaodoko, 2025). Maimela and Mbonde (2025) note that AI potential for inclusion depends critically on whether institutions actively design for accessibility, or whether AI adoption defaults to models that replicate existing advantages.

3.3 The Infrastructure and Equity Challenge

Despite these documented benefits, infrastructure constraints remain among the most significant barriers to equitable AI adoption in African HEIs. Only 40% of African primary schools and 50% of lower-secondary schools had reliable internet connectivity as of 2024, and while tertiary institutions are generally better connected, chronic power instability, high data costs, and limited device penetration create compounding barriers (DigitalDefynd, 2025). Patel and Ragolane (2024) document the differential impact of these constraints across South African universities, finding that historically disadvantaged institutions face the greatest infrastructure barriers while also serving students who would benefit most from AI-enabled support. Sele and Mukundi (2024a), analysing educational inequality in Nigeria and Kenya, argue that infrastructure deficits in education reflect distributional injustices rooted in colonial economic structures, and require political as well as technical responses -- a framing directly relevant to educational leaders engaging with AI adoption decisions.

4. The Policy Landscape: Gaps, Progress, and the Leadership Imperative

4.1 The Institutional Policy Deficit

The most consistent finding in the empirical literature on AI in African higher education is the alarming gap between the pace of AI adoption and the development of governance frameworks needed to manage it responsibly. Cudjoe and Adebayo (2025) find that the

overwhelming majority of sub-Saharan African HEIs lack any formal AI policy. Angwaomaodoko (2025) documents the predominance of ad hoc, individual-level decisions in the absence of institutional guidance, creating inconsistency, legal exposure, and unequal student experiences. Mabanja et al. (2025) identify formal policy absence as the primary risk factor for harmful AI outcomes in Ugandan and East African HEIs. Guadu et al. (2025), surveying the Ethiopian and wider African context, conclude that policy development is the most urgent priority for responsible AI governance in African HEIs.

Where institutional AI policies do exist, the literature documents wide variation in approach and quality. Maluleke (2025) identifies a spectrum from prohibitionist policies that treat AI primarily as an academic integrity threat to progressive enabling frameworks that encourage responsible AI use while providing clear guidance on ethical boundaries. Thaldar et al. (2025), in their detailed case study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Generative AI Academic Guidelines, document an enabling framework that explicitly encourages AI use for augmenting academic productivity and innovation, requiring transparency and disclosure while aligning with South Africa National AI Policy Framework. The UKZN approach is distinguished by its recognition that prohibitionist AI policies are both unenforceable and counterproductive in an environment where students and faculty will use AI tools regardless of institutional restrictions. The policy architecture that emerges from the most effective institutional frameworks consistently includes: clear articulation of permissible and prohibited AI uses; academic integrity standards with explicit disclosure requirements; data privacy provisions; formal AI tool review processes; and mechanisms for policy review and updating (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Thaldar et al., 2025; Oguntona & Emere, 2025).

4.2 National Policy Frameworks and Continental Governance

At the national level, a small but growing number of African states have developed AI governance frameworks with specific implications for higher education. South Africa National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2024) provides the most developed national policy environment on the continent, establishing principles for responsible AI development that explicitly encompass the education sector. Rwanda National AI Policy and Nigeria National AI Strategy similarly signal national commitment to AI governance, though implementation capacity and specific provisions relevant to higher education vary significantly across these frameworks (Mastercard, 2025; Woldegiorgis, 2026). Senegal National Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence (SNDIA), launched in September 2023, is notable for its emphasis on ethical AI, though specific legal frameworks remain under development (ICHEI, 2025).

The African Union Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy provides an overarching strategic

blueprint emphasising evidence-based monitoring, workforce capacity, and transparency standards (Ndembu et al., 2025). However, Woldegiorgis (2026) raises important concerns about the extent to which continental AI governance frameworks are shaped by African community interests versus donor and Global North technology company priorities -- a concern directly relevant to educational leaders who must decide how much weight to give national and continental frameworks in shaping institutional policy. Leaders who engage with these frameworks critically rather than deferentially -- contributing African higher education perspectives to their ongoing development - - exercise a form of policy leadership that extends beyond their own institutions.

4.3 The Leadership Role in Policy Development and Institutional Change

The literature is unequivocal that effective AI policy development in African HEIs requires active senior leadership commitment, not delegation to technical or administrative staff (Maluleke, 2025; Maina & Kuria, 2024; Chisom et al., 2024). Maluleke (2025) identifies senior management prioritisation as the single most consistent predictor of effective AI governance outcomes across African HEIs. Where Vice Chancellors and senior leadership teams have personally championed AI governance as an institutional priority, policy frameworks have been developed more quickly, more comprehensively, and with greater institutional buy-in. Where AI governance has been treated as a technical matter to be managed by IT departments without institutional coordination, the result has consistently been policy fragmentation, inconsistent implementation, and heightened risks.

Sele and Mukundi (2025), in their analysis of the relationship between education, political policy, and economic empowerment, argue that the most impactful educational investments are those driven by visionary leadership with a long-term commitment to transformative outcomes, rather than short-term compliance or reputational management. This principle applies directly to AI governance: educational leaders who approach AI policy as a long-term institutional investment in equity, quality, and community benefit will produce qualitatively different outcomes than those who approach it primarily as a risk management exercise. Hlongwane et al. (2024) reinforce this point, documenting how Zimbabwean HEIs where leaders demonstrated sustained personal commitment to AI governance produced measurably better policy outcomes than comparable institutions where leadership engagement was intermittent or delegated.

5. Ethics, Equity, and Epistemic Justice: The Leadership Dimensions

5.1 Academic Integrity and the Generative AI Challenge

Academic integrity in the age of generative AI represents perhaps the most immediate policy

challenge facing educational leaders in African HEIs. The capacity of large language models to produce coherent, contextually plausible academic text has disrupted traditional assessment models and rendered many existing plagiarism detection approaches inadequate (Rugeiyamu et al., 2026; Funda & Mbangeleli, 2024). For African HEIs, the challenge is acute for several interconnected reasons: many institutions lack resources for sophisticated detection infrastructure; the prevalence of English as a medium of instruction -- a language in which many students are not fully fluent -- may increase reliance on AI-generated text; and the cultural context of academic integrity varies across the continent, making blanket prohibitionist policies poorly calibrated to institutional realities (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Angwaomaodoko, 2025).

The emerging scholarly consensus favours a fundamental rethinking of assessment design over technological detection arms races. Thaldar et al. (2025) argue that authentic assessment -- forms of evaluation that require students to demonstrate contextually specific, personally situated understanding that cannot be delegated to AI -- is the most sustainable response to generative AI in educational contexts. This requires a significant shift in assessment practice: from examinations and essays that test generic knowledge to performance tasks, oral assessments, reflective portfolios, and community-engaged projects that require authentic human engagement. Educational leaders must create the institutional conditions -- curriculum review processes, faculty development support, assessment policy reform -- that enable this shift to happen at scale. Transparency and disclosure frameworks represent a complementary approach: rather than attempting to detect and penalise AI use post hoc, institutional policies can require students to explicitly disclose AI assistance used, shifting the locus of academic integrity from surveillance to responsibility (Thaldar et al., 2025; Maluleke, 2025).

5.2 Algorithmic Bias and the Equity Implications for African Students

AI systems that make consequential decisions about students -- assessing academic risk, recommending interventions, evaluating performance, or determining eligibility for financial support -- inevitably embed the assumptions and patterns of the data on which they were trained. When training datasets are drawn predominantly from Global North educational contexts, the resulting algorithms may systematically misread African students' behaviours, producing biased assessments that disadvantage rather than support them (Ayandibu, 2024; Hlongwane et al., 2024; Soko, 2025). Educational leaders in African HEIs must therefore exercise critical scrutiny of AI tools presented as neutral decision-support systems. Funda and Mbangeleli (2024) document acute concerns about algorithmic bias in South African HEIs, noting that AI-mediated student support systems have in some cases replicated racially differentiated risk assessments in new technological form. Guadu et al. (2025) call for

mandatory bias auditing of AI systems deployed in African educational contexts -- a requirement that educational leaders should embed in their institutional procurement and governance frameworks.

5.3 Data Sovereignty and Privacy

The collection and processing of detailed student data by AI-enabled university platforms raises fundamental questions about data sovereignty and privacy that carry particular salience in the African context. AI platforms developed by foreign technology companies will process student data under the regulatory frameworks of their home jurisdictions, with implications for the rights and protections available to African students and institutions (Funda & Mbangeleli, 2024; Thaldar et al., 2025). Educational leaders must address data sovereignty through both contractual and architectural means. Contractually, procurement of AI platforms should require explicit data processing agreements specifying data residency, prohibiting secondary commercial use of student data, and providing institutional data portability. Architecturally, preference should be given to platforms designed with tenant data isolation and privacy-protective infrastructure, particularly those built specifically for the African higher education context (Sele & Whittaker, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025; Sele Media Nigeria, 2025).

5.4 Digital Colonialism and Epistemic Justice

At the deepest level, the ethics of AI in African higher education cannot be separated from the broader politics of knowledge and power that have shaped African universities since their colonial founding. Large language models and other AI tools are trained on corpora overwhelmingly dominated by English-language content produced in Global North contexts, encoding assumptions about what constitutes authoritative knowledge that reflect specific historical and geopolitical formations rather than universal epistemic standards (Woldegiorgis, 2026; Chisom et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2020). When African HEIs deploy such tools without critical scrutiny, they risk perpetuating what Woldegiorgis (2026) calls epistemic dependency -- a condition in which African scholarly communities are positioned as consumers of knowledge frameworks produced elsewhere, rather than as generators of distinctive intellectual traditions.

UNESCO (2025) documents how AI tools can inadvertently undermine African languages, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge systems when deployed without adequate attention to linguistic and cultural diversity. There are over 2,000 languages spoken across the African continent, the vast majority of which are absent from major AI training datasets -- a systematic exclusion with direct implications for the quality and relevance of AI-mediated learning for African students. Soko (2025) and Chisom et al. (2024) call for explicitly Afrocentric AI governance frameworks that mandate the use of locally generated training data, require AI systems to demonstrate cultural and linguistic relevance, and centre African epistemologies in the design and evaluation of educational AI.

Ayandibu (2024) situates this imperative within a broader framework of decolonial educational policy. Educational leaders who take epistemic justice seriously will not merely manage the adoption of globally available AI tools: they will advocate for, and where possible invest in, the development of AI tools grounded in African contexts and communities.

6. Faculty Development, Institutional Capacity, and AI Literacy

6.1 The Faculty Capacity Gap

A recurring theme in the literature is the significant gap between the AI capabilities that institutions are deploying and the understanding, skills, and confidence that faculty members have to engage with those capabilities effectively and critically (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Oguntona & Emere, 2025; Hlongwane et al., 2024). More important than technical literacy are the pedagogical, ethical, and critical dimensions of AI competence: the capacity to evaluate AI-generated content critically, to design assessments that maintain authentic learning in an AI-mediated environment, to support students in developing their own AI literacy, and to recognise and challenge bias and epistemic injustice in AI systems (Guadu et al., 2025; Matto & Ponera, 2025). Sele and Mukundi (2024c), in their analysis of emotional intelligence and pedagogy, argue that effective teaching requires not merely technical competence but sophisticated relational intelligence -- the capacity to build environments of trust and critical engagement. AI literacy, properly understood, is an extension of this pedagogical intelligence.

6.2 Institutional Strategies for Building AI Literacy

The literature identifies several institutional strategies for building AI literacy among faculty that have shown promise. Structured professional development programmes -- designed specifically for African educational contexts rather than simply imported from Global North providers -- are identified as the most effective mechanism for building faculty AI competence at scale (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Maluleke, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025). Communities of practice -- networks of faculty engaged in collaborative exploration and critical reflection on AI in their teaching and research -- are identified by Oguntona and Emere (2025) as particularly valuable for sustaining AI literacy development beyond initial training events. In the African context, where formal professional development resources are often constrained, peer learning communities offer a resource-efficient pathway to distributed AI capacity building.

Curriculum integration of AI competencies is identified by multiple sources as both a priority and a challenge (Maimela & Mbonde, 2025; Chisom et al., 2024; Cudjoe & Adebayo, 2025). AI literacy should not be confined to specialist AI or computer science programmes: it is a graduate attribute relevant across all disciplines in a world where AI is reshaping professional practice in law, medicine, engineering,

social work, and every other field. Educational leaders must drive curriculum review processes that embed AI competencies -- including critical AI evaluation, ethical reasoning about AI, and discipline-specific AI applications -- into the graduate attributes of all programmes, not merely those in technology-oriented fields.

6.3 Organisational Structures for AI Governance

Beyond individual faculty capacity, the literature emphasises the importance of institutional structures for AI governance: formal mechanisms through which the institution exercises collective oversight of AI adoption and use (Thaldar et al., 2025; Maluleke, 2025; Mabanja et al., 2025). These typically include AI governance committees or working groups with cross-institutional representation; dedicated AI policy officer roles; formal AI tool review processes before institutional adoption; and feedback mechanisms through which students and staff can raise AI-related concerns (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Oguntona & Emere, 2025). Educational leaders evaluating AI-native platforms must assess not merely the functionality of the platform but the governance architecture within which institutional data and decision-making authority are embedded. Emerging Africa-first platforms such as SeleNexus, designed with multi-tenant architecture and explicit data isolation for the African higher education context, illustrate how governance considerations can be embedded in platform design from the outset (Sele Media Nigeria, 2025; Sele Media Malawi, 2026).

7. A Framework for AI-Responsive Educational Leadership in Africa (FARELA)

7.1 Framework Overview

Drawing on the foregoing analysis, we propose a Framework for AI-Responsive Educational Leadership in Africa (FARELA), organised around five interconnected domains: Vision and Values Leadership; Governance Architecture; Equity and Justice Commitment; Capacity and Culture Building; and Evidence and Accountability. These domains correspond to the key leadership functions that the literature identifies as most critical for responsible, contextually grounded AI governance in African HEIs. The framework is explicitly designed for the African context, drawing on African educational governance traditions, community-based accountability frameworks, and the epistemic commitments of African higher education rather than transposing Global North models onto different institutional and cultural realities.

7.2 Domain One: Vision and Values Leadership

AI-responsive educational leadership begins with the articulation of a clear institutional vision for AI that is explicitly grounded in the institution values, equity commitments, and community context. This requires leaders to think deeply about what AI is for in their

institution -- what educational and social goods it should serve -- and to develop this vision through genuine consultation with faculty, students, staff, and community stakeholders (Woldegiorgis, 2026; Chisom et al., 2024; Sele & Mukundi, 2024d). Vision and values leadership in this domain requires: explicit commitment to epistemic justice and the recognition of African knowledge systems in AI-mediated education; clear articulation of the equity outcomes that AI adoption should advance; transparent acknowledgement of AI risks and limitations; and genuine openness to the possibility that some AI tools, however sophisticated, are not appropriate for the institution context and community (Ayandibu, 2024; Maimela & Mbonde, 2025; Soko, 2025).

7.3 Domain Two: Governance Architecture

Effective AI governance requires institutional architecture: formal structures, processes, and roles through which governance responsibilities are exercised. In the FARELA framework, this domain encompasses the development of comprehensive institutional AI policies; the establishment of cross-institutional AI governance bodies with representative membership; formal AI tool review and procurement processes; academic integrity frameworks adapted for the AI age; and data governance protocols that protect institutional and student data sovereignty (Maluleke, 2025; Thaldar et al., 2025; Cudjoe & Adebayo, 2025). Governance architecture must also address the temporal challenge of AI policy: the technology is evolving rapidly, and governance frameworks that are adequate today may be inadequate within eighteen months. Leaders must build adaptive governance mechanisms -- regular policy review cycles, horizon-scanning processes, and feedback loops from the institutional community -- that enable governance frameworks to evolve at a pace commensurate with the technology landscape (Maluleke, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025).

7.4 Domain Three: Equity and Justice Commitment

The FARELA framework third domain requires educational leaders to make equity and justice not merely aspirational values but operational commitments embedded in AI governance processes and outcomes. This means: mandatory disaggregated monitoring of AI system impacts by student demographic characteristics to detect differential effects; bias auditing requirements for AI tools adopted at institutional level; explicit data sovereignty protections in all AI platform procurement contracts; and active engagement with Afrocentric AI development initiatives (Guadu et al., 2025; Funda & Mbangeleli, 2024; UNESCO, 2025; Woldegiorgis, 2026). Equity commitment also requires institutional leaders to address the differential AI readiness that exists within their own institutions. Sele and Mukundi (2024a) document how within-institution resource differentials -- between well-funded and under-resourced departments, between urban and rural

campuses, between full-time and distance learners -- can reproduce broader societal inequalities in new technological forms.

7.5 Domain Four: Capacity and Culture Building

The fourth domain addresses the human and cultural dimensions of AI governance: building the AI literacy, pedagogical confidence, and critical engagement capacities that faculty, students, and staff need to participate meaningfully in AI-mediated educational environments. This encompasses structured professional development programmes for faculty; AI literacy integration into student induction and academic skills programmes; the development of communities of practice for peer learning and collaborative experimentation; and the creation of institutional cultures that treat AI engagement as a site of critical intellectual inquiry rather than either uncritical enthusiasm or technophobic resistance (Maina & Kuria, 2024; Hlongwane et al., 2024; Mabanja et al., 2025). Leaders who acknowledge the identity challenges AI poses for experienced academics -- creating safe spaces for experimental learning without performance pressure -- and who model their own ongoing AI learning, will produce qualitatively different institutional cultures from those who treat AI adoption as a straightforward technical change management challenge (Sele & Mukundi, 2024c; Chisom et al., 2024).

7.6 Domain Five: Evidence and Accountability

The fifth domain requires leaders to establish rigorous evidence systems for monitoring and evaluating the impacts of AI governance decisions and of AI tools deployed in the institution. This encompasses systematic data collection on AI adoption patterns, student outcomes, faculty experiences, and equity impacts; investment in institutional research capacity; transparent reporting to institutional governance bodies and community stakeholders; and contribution to the broader African higher education research community through publication and knowledge sharing (Rugeiyamu et al., 2026; Guadu et al., 2025; Woldegiorgis, 2026). Evidence and accountability also requires intellectual honesty about what is not yet known. The empirical evidence base for AI in African higher education, while growing, remains characterised by theoretical propositions that outrun documented evidence. Leaders who communicate this uncertainty honestly -- committing to evidence-based adaptation rather than betting institutional futures on unproven AI promises -- will build the institutional trust that sustainable AI governance requires.

8. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

8.1 Synthesis

This article has argued that the governance of AI in African higher education is fundamentally a leadership challenge. The technology itself will not govern itself.

The values it serves, the equity it advances or undermines, the epistemic traditions it respects or effaces, and the communities it empowers or marginalises are all outcomes of human decisions: decisions made by educational leaders exercising their responsibilities with greater or lesser vision, commitment, and competence. The literature reviewed reveals both the urgency of this leadership challenge -- given the speed of AI diffusion, the severity of the policy gap, and the depth of equity risks -- and the genuine possibility of meeting it. A growing number of African HEIs, supported by an increasingly rich body of scholarship and a generation of educational technology innovators building explicitly for African contexts, are demonstrating that responsible, equitable, and epistemically just AI governance is not merely aspirational but achievable. The FARELA framework proposed in this article is offered as a contribution to that achievement.

8.2 Recommendations for Institutional Leaders

Educational leaders should: develop formal, comprehensive AI governance policies as an urgent institutional priority; constitute cross-institutional AI governance bodies with representative membership including students, faculty, and community stakeholders; invest in structured AI literacy professional development for all academic and professional services staff; embed AI competencies as explicit graduate attributes in all programme reviews; require mandatory bias auditing and data sovereignty protections in all AI platform procurement; and commit to transparent monitoring and public reporting of AI governance outcomes with disaggregation by student equity characteristics. These recommendations align with and extend those advanced by Maluleke (2025), Maina and Kuria (2024), Thaladar et al. (2025), and Chisom et al. (2024).

8.3 Recommendations for National Policymakers

Governments and national regulatory bodies should: develop and resource national AI strategies with explicit provisions for higher education, including minimum standards for institutional AI policies; establish national data protection frameworks that safeguard educational data sovereignty; create public funding instruments for Africa-first AI platform development and for African language AI research; ensure meaningful inclusion of higher education communities in national and continental AI governance processes; and support continental knowledge-sharing platforms enabling African HEIs to learn from each other governance experiences. These recommendations are consistent with the calls advanced by Woldegiorgis (2026), Soko (2025), and Ahmed et al. (2025).

8.4 Concluding Remarks

The choices that African educational leaders make about AI in the coming years will shape the intellectual, equity, and governance character of African higher

education for decades. Africa is not a passive recipient of a technology revolution designed elsewhere: it is an active participant with distinctive traditions, urgent priorities, and the human creativity and institutional ambition to develop AI governance approaches that speak to its own realities. The framework, analysis, and recommendations offered in this article are intended as a resource for leaders navigating this consequential terrain -- not as a definitive roadmap, but as a contribution to the collective intellectual project of imagining and building AI governance for African higher education that is worthy of the continent richness, diversity, and ambition. As Sele and Mukundi (2024a) have argued in a different but related context, the deepest inequalities in African education are not inevitable: they are outcomes of choices, and different choices can produce different outcomes.

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