EDITORIAL

Beyond adoption: AI, justice, and pedagogical possibility in Global South higher education

M. Singh
Faculty of Humanities
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2721-7555 marcina.research@gmail.com

M. Samuel
Faculty of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9425-7186

D. Ng'ambi
Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7281-2292

ABSTRACT

This article synthesises the contributions to the Special Issue on AI in higher education in the Global South and argues that the key question is no longer whether AI should be adopted, but what happens after adoption in contexts marked by colonial legacies, uneven infrastructures, linguistic hierarchies, and unequal institutional capacity. Moving beyond celebratory and dystopian framings, the article shows that AI in the Global South is always mediated by questions of access, epistemic justice, governance, pedagogy, and power, and that its effects depend on how it is designed, interpreted, regulated, and embedded in local institutional life. Drawing on the articles in the issue, this contribution identifies a shared call for bounded and accountable AI integration, stronger AI literacy, assessment redesign, protection of human judgment, and contextually grounded governance. It also reflects broader sectoral conditions that shape AI uptake, including policy influence beyond formal lawmakers, institutional surveillance, competitive silos, inflated claims of expertise, and the risk that innovation may reproduce exclusion rather than transformation. The conclusion proposes a post-adoption agenda for higher education in the Global South centred on digital and epistemic justice, collective capacity-building, public-interest collaboration, and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence in higher education; Global South; AI governance; AI literacy; Digital Justice; Epistemic Justice; Environmental Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The speed at which Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, especially generative AI such as Thaura, Claude, Perplexity, and others, have taken root has caused turbulence across higher education institutions worldwide. Yet, in the Global South, AI cannot be understood solely as a technical development or an institutional trend, because it enters systems already shaped by colonial legacies, unequal infrastructures, linguistic hierarchies and uneven access to digital resources (Olaniyan, Martins, Al Maqrashi 2026; Hussain, Bresnahan and Zhuang 2025; Opesemowo and Adekomaya, 2024). In this context, it is also a pedagogical, ethical and political question about what it is for, whose knowledge is visibilised and how inclusion is realised.

This Special Issue began with an interest in the practices and possibilities of AI in higher education in the Global South. However, the contributions show that these practices and possibilities are always mediated by institutional conditions, human judgment, and structural inequalities. Recent scholarship has consistently shown that AI in the Global South cannot be discussed without linking to issues of fairness, representation, accessibility and policy readiness (Khoza and Van der Walt 2025; Jamal Eddine, Gide and Al-Sabbagh 2026). Rather than treating AI as inherently emancipatory or inherently harmful, the contributions in this Special Issue show that its effects depend on how it is designed, governed, interpreted and pedagogically integrated. We also have to emphasise that, while we use terms like 'Africa' and the 'Global South' as necessary analytical shorthand, we explicitly reject any assumption that these spaces are monolithic. We recognise that national borders are colonial artefacts, yet no single country's trajectory can stand in for another's distinct political, economic, and institutional realities. Our analysis, therefore, engages with shared structural pressures without flattening the profound heterogeneity across and within these regions. The aim of this article is to analytically synthesise the contributions presented in this Special Issue and link these to broader debates about AI in higher education in the Global South.

The question we are asking is, what happens after AI is adopted in the Global South? In addition, we highlight the higher education landscape in which AI adoption is happening

WHY DOES THE GLOBAL SOUTH MATTER ANALYTICALLY?

Discussions about AI in the Global South matter because they challenge the assumption that AI is a universal technological shift with uniform meanings and consequences. Scholarship instead shows that AI is shaped by substantively unequal infrastructures, uneven institutional capacity, and historically sedimented hierarchies of language and power that condition how systems are built, adopted, and governed across the Global South (Khoza and Van der Walt

2025; Radiya-Dixit and Christin 2025). We need to take the Global South seriously – but not in a normative way. What we mean by 'seriously' is expanding beyond the geographical scope of AI studies. It means treating the context not as a background, but as a constitutive of how AI works, who it serves and what forms of development it enables (and disables!).

A central tension that emerges from the literature is between the promise of innovation (Dos Santos, de Santana, Borges, Modolo, and Moreno 2025; Kshetri, 2025; Reimers, Azim, Palomo and Thony 2026) and the reproduction of exclusion (Siad and Sagar 2025; Hübschle and Shearing 2026; Borines, Turi and Hedru 2024). Local research on AI in higher education shows growing interest in AI-enhanced teaching, learning, and administration, but it also finds that implementation remains constrained by inadequate infrastructure, limited staff preparedness, unequal access to digital tools, and unresolved ethical concerns (Mogoale, Pretorius, Mogase and Segooa 2025; Sokhulu, Zulu and Lott-Naidoo 2025; Maluleke 2025). This tension is analytically significant because it reveals that AI cannot be read only through the narratives of modernisation but MUST also be examined as a site where structural inequalities are reconfigured. This reconfiguration often occurs in ways that intensify existing asymmetries rather than resolving them.

Foundational to this analysis is the question of access and exclusion. Van Wyk (2024) argues that access must be understood beyond mere availability of tools, since meaningful participation depends on digital competence, institutional support and equitable conditions for use. Framing it in this manner allows us to see that exclusion is not only a lack of connectivity or hardware, but also involves restricted access to the social, pedagogical and epistemic resources needed to use AI critically and productively. This is particularly significant in contexts where institutions adopt AI under pressure to modernise and win the "We use AI" institutional t-shirt, while lacking the resources to shape implementation on their *own* terms.
The issue of pedagogical support is also closely tied to epistemic agency and, therefore, must be part of this conversation. Global South scholarship on AI in education and development argues that the field must move beyond utopian and dystopian framings and instead ask how AI affects the capacity of students, lecturers and researchers to participate in knowledge production (Peters and Tukdeo 2025). This is critical because pedagogical systems are never neutral. If AI tools privilege dominant languages, standardised forms of reasoning or externally defined measures of educational value, they risk narrowing what counts as legitimate knowledge – so where is the space of indigenous knowledge systems? By contrast, a more powerful account of epistemic agency would treat AI as valuable only to the extent that it supports its people in interpreting, adapting, contesting and producing knowledge in relation to their own contexts.

The concern about whose knowledge is legitimised is directly linked to the tension between innovation and coloniality. Emerging debates in this area suggest that locally grounded innovation is growing, especially in education, robotics and domain-specific applications, but that these developments unfold within broader systems of dependency that often constrain autonomy (Adeleke and Akinwale 2024; Da Cunha, Lira, Dansa de Alencar, Bartholo and Caulliraux 2026). Analytically, the point is not to deny innovation in the South, but to ask under what conditions innovation occurs, who controls the underlying infrastructures, and whose priorities are embedded in system designs. When these conditions remain externally structured at the local level, innovation can coexist with forms of epistemic and technological subordination.

We depart here to focus on governance. Scholarship, including the work of Peters and Tukdeo (2025) and Slimi (2026), argues that governance in the Global South should not be treated as the mere local implementation of models developed elsewhere. Instead, governance must be connected to the lived practices, institutional conditions and developmental realities that differ across the Global South settings (Adeleke and Akinwale 2024). This includes attention to how AI is used in educational institutions and professional settings, as well as how people negotiate trust, credibility, and authorship in everyday encounters with automated systems. Governance, in other words, is not only a matter of formal regulation: it is also embedded in daily practice.

From this perspective, the argument is not that the Global South should mirror the Global North or compete with it on identical terms. This kind of benchmarking of what is deemed excellent or who is lagging behind is unhelpful and reinforces monocultural thinking. Instead, as the scholarship asserts, we need context-sensitive, locally adaptive, and socially-grounded forms of AI development that respond to community needs (Khoza and Van der Walt 2025). Drawing on De Sousa Santos's (2014) concept of ecologies of knowledge, development should never require epistemic sameness but should enable plural pathways through which technologies are shaped by the histories, languages, and aspirations of the communities they are meant to serve. This is not only a pathway for epistemic ownership but also a departure from coloniality, '*that we breathe all the time and every day*' (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

In essence, the Global South matters analytically because it makes visible that technological futures are always political, and that meaningful advancement depends not on imitation, but on building AI systems that serve local worlds on their own terms.

NEW FRONTIERS AND ADVANCEMENTS OF AI IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Across the Global South, AI is not merely being adopted; it is being reworked through local conditions, constraints, and aspirations. Instead of focusing solely on cutting-edge computing power, many countries are asking a different question: How can AI genuinely improve people's everyday learning experiences? This has led to a wave of practical, inclusive innovation deeply rooted in local realities (see Table 1).

In Ghana, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, for example, tools such as Eneza Education and M-Shule show how powerful AI can be even without high-speed internet. By using SMS and basic mobile phones (Eneza Education 2025), these platforms bring structured learning to communities that might otherwise be left out. Building on this idea, Maski AI (South Africa) uses WhatsApp, a platform already woven into daily life, to provide a tutor for learners from Grade R to 12. Learners can ask questions in subjects like Mathematics and Life Sciences, while teachers can quickly generate CAPS-aligned worksheets, saving time and strengthening classroom practice (Future SA 2025). Perhaps the most transformative shift is the rise of conversational AI – tools that allow people to learn through dialogue rather than static content. Within this space, the work of Dick Ng'ambi (South Africa), TCF Edutbot, stands out as both innovative and deeply grounded in educational practice (Ng'ambi 2026).

In other parts of the Global South, different priorities shape innovation. In Southeast Asia, platforms such as Ruangguru and Zenius operate at a national scale, supporting millions of learners with personalised, AI-driven content. Meanwhile, in Latin America, platforms like Platzi and Ubits AI focus on helping people build skills for employment, showing how AI can support not just schooling, but entire career pathways (Ruangguru 2025).

The developments across the Global South show that there is no single path for AI in education – rather, there are many. More specifically, Africa is leading in multilingual, inclusive, and low-connectivity AI (Tsanni 2023; Eneza Education, 2025; Jordan et al 2025). Latin America is focusing on workforce development and adaptive learning (Platzi, 2026), and Southeast Asia is scaling AI across national education systems (Ruangguru 2025; EdTech Marketplace Asia 2026).

What ties these approaches together is a shared commitment to equity and relevance. AI in the Global South is being shaped by real needs – access to education, language diversity, and cultural identity – rather than purely by technological ambition.

In the Global South, we must abandon the fantasy that salvation will arrive from elsewhere, dressed as expertise, funding, or ethical approval. No one is coming to rescue us. We are the authors of our own educational futures, and we must refuse the habit of looking northward for standards that were never designed with our histories, languages, or struggles in

mind. The challenge before us is not to chase borrowed models of greatness, but to summon the courage to name, nurture, and trust the radical intelligence, dignity, and innovation that have always lived among us.

Dimension	AI Initiative	Country/Region	Key Contribution to SDG 4
Accessible	Rori	Ghana	AI-powered learning support and tutoring for learners.
	Book Buddy	Zimbabwe	Digital learning companion that improves access to educational resources.
	Eneza Education	Ghana, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire	Mobile-based learning platform reaching underserved learners.
	Digi-Wise/Ferby	India (via UNDP)	AI-enabled educational support for remote and underserved communities.
	Save Education Learning Bot	Nigeria	Chatbot-based learning support for students.
	BantuX	South Africa	AI-assisted educational access for learners in resource-constrained settings.
	Maski AI	South Africa	Free CAPS-aligned AI tutor and educational assistant delivered through WhatsApp.
Affordable	BantuX	South Africa	Low-cost educational support for learners and teachers.
	Save Education Learning Bot	Nigeria	Affordable AI-enabled tutoring and educational assistance.
	Maski AI	South Africa	Free WhatsApp-based AI tutor that reduces cost barriers to quality educational support.
Language: Inclusive	Eneza Afrika	Pan-African	Multilingual educational support across African contexts.
	Semmo	South Africa	Supports South Africa's 11 official languages.
	IsiXhosa AI Tutor	South Africa	AI-enabled tutoring in isiXhosa.
	Ubongo	East and Sub-Saharan Africa	Educational content available in multiple African languages.
	GMind AI	Africa-wide	Supports Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Kiswahili and African Pidgin.
Offline-Capable	Rori	Ghana	Learning support in low-connectivity environments.
	Book Buddy	Zimbabwe	Supports learning where internet connectivity is limited.
	Eneza Education	Ghana, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire	Mobile-first learning with low-bandwidth functionality.
	Digi-Wise/Ferby	India	Designed for digital inclusion in connectivity-constrained contexts.
	Semmo	South Africa	Accessible in low-bandwidth educational environments.
	IsiXhosa AI Tutor	South Africa	Supports learning in underserved contexts.
	BantuX	South Africa	Designed for broad accessibility and low-resource deployment.
	Gwala AI	South Africa	Offline-compatible educational support.
	Nawes	South Africa	AI-enabled learning in low-connectivity environments.
	Kumwe	West Africa	AI-assisted educational access despite connectivity constraints.

	KweziBot	West Africa	Curriculum support and learner assistance in resource-constrained settings.
Intelligent Assistants	GMind AI	Africa-wide	Teacher-assistant functions and personalised educational support.
	KweziBot	West Africa	Curriculum guidance and learner support.
	Maski AI	South Africa	Conversational AI assistant supporting both teachers and learners through WhatsApp.
AI for STEM Innovation	MindJoy	South Africa	Promotes AI-integrated STEM education through exploration, creativity, coding, and computational thinking rather than rote memorisation.

Table 1: Selected AI Innovations in the Global South and their link to SDG 4. Adapted from Ng'ambi (2025).

AI POLICY-MAKERS AND POLICY-SHAPERS: DEVELOPMENTAL INNOVATION OR DISGUISED MARKETISATION?

The above exploration accents the practical innovations that are possible within an AI landscape that could activate appropriate Southern localised value. Nevertheless, a wider-angle lens is needed because decisions about AI adoption are rarely educational alone. This is because they are also mediated by funding priorities, governance arrangements, and unequal power relations. Instead, much of the decision-making related to the introduction of technological innovations, including AI usage, could be argued to be driven by social, political and transnational economic interests.

For example, studies related to small island developing states (SIDS) show how the vulnerability of their economies and geographical isolation co-opt decision-makers to select technological solutions for their schooling contexts, driven by the interests of funders, suppliers, and donors of technological hardware and software (Jules and Ressler (eds.) 2017; Samuel and Mariaye 2015). Consultants, technological industry agents and local politicians collude (consciously or unconsciously) to create the facilitative local conditions in which the recipients (schools, teachers, and parents) conceptualise the introduction of the new technological strategies (technological hardware and software) as evidence of a modernising society and serving local interests (Oojorah and Udhin (eds.), 2024). Parents, with their pursuits of advancing their children's engagement with a technologised modern world, uncritically advocate the introduction of new technological "advancements" within their local schools and classrooms, unaware of their complicity in bolstering the interests of wider social, political and economic forces (Ramtohul, Samuel, and Mohabeer 2026).

It may also be that technophiles within the research community (academic scholars) exert a powerful steering influence on this decision-making landscape. They advocate adopting new technological approaches that open the market for the technology economy, but their views are mostly presented as if their concerns are limited to educational matters. This scenario raises the question of who the policymakers are in decisions related to technological innovation. Traditional definitions of policymakers refer to those who write, enact, monitor, and evaluate legislative policy texts. However, the shaping influences of policy extend to a range of stakeholders who are complicit in the design and choices that shape the environment within which policy decisions are made. These shapers have a powerful influence on the manoeuvring of choices about the technology spread within society. They may even profess to be sidelined in the policymaking processes (Ramtohul, Samuel, and Mohabeer 2026).

Politicians recognise this silent power and rely on the expressed interests of this cadre of influencers, since they represent their funding resources or their electorate, which places officials in power. These systems operate across national boundaries as the locals reinforce the global distribution of power.

Greater research clarity should illuminate how policy shaping unfolds, not just at policy adoption stages across spaces and constituencies but also across time. For example, what happens to introduced innovations and policy projects over time? What are their enduring sustainable developmental capabilities (Amponsah and Babarinde 2022)? This complicity between agents is not just about macro-decision-making regarding national-scale policy choices, but also about how local, everyday choices are made in homes, classrooms, and institutions (with or without policy). The everyday and the macro-level copulate symbiotically. Policy is considered to be that which occurs in action, embedded with its consistencies, tensions, and paradoxes at all levels and across time and with multiple competing (and not always consistent) forces.

The policy landscape is never neutral, and decisions about adopting policy, its resourcing, implementation, and the sustainability of its programmes and projects are connected within a network of power dynamics that favour specific interests. While AI in education policy might be presented as about innovation, education, and development, it also embodies social, political, and economic interests. Africa could be considered as littered with the ghosts of past projects (Webb, Khau, and Namubiru, (eds.) 2024), driven by agendas of limited funding exigencies and inattention to long-term building of local capacity. Samuel (2024), therefore, argues that project engagement within the African context should move beyond saviour

mentality, which portrays Africa as only in need of development and rescuing from global investors, without sufficient critical examination of the sustainable impact and influence.

Policy-shapers align themselves to these dynamics of power consciously or inadvertently. However, a more deliberative agentic stance should be adopted driven from within southern contexts, not just as recipients of aid but as directors who will establish the ecological long-term interaction between northern and southern partners. With this broader context in view, we turn to a set of editorial observations that arise not from the articles themselves, but from our experience of academic life in the sector.

EDITORIAL OBSERVATIONS

While the contributions to this Special Issue offer important conceptual and empirical insights into AI in higher education, they do not exhaust the realities currently shaping institutional life. As scholars working within South African higher education, we are also attentive to a set of recurring patterns that may not always appear in formal research outputs but are nonetheless shaping the sector's response to AI in significant ways. The observations that follow are therefore not presented as findings derived from the articles in this issue, but as editorial reflections grounded in our experience of academic life in this space.

Observation 1: Surveilling AI use in higher education (Police and Culprits)

For us, the question is not whether universities in the Global South should regulate AI, but how they can do so without deepening inequality, intensifying surveillance, or reducing teaching and learning to shallow compliance exercises. Much of the institutional response to generative AI has focused on students: their use of AI in assignments, the threat AI allegedly poses to academic integrity, and the need for disclosure and regulation. Yet a more uncomfortable issue has received far less scrutiny: academic staff are also using AI, not only in teaching and administration, but increasingly in the production of feedback, learning materials, grant applications, reviews, and scholarly publications.

This asymmetry matters because it creates a double standard. Students are often treated as potential offenders, while staff use of AI is more likely to be framed as innovation, productivity, or professional efficiency. The problem is not that staff should never use AI, but that many institutions still have no clear precedent for how such use should be governed when it shapes scholarly argument, research writing, editorial labour, or academic judgment. In the absence of clear norms, universities risk normalising a system in which students are disciplined

for undisclosed AI use while staff may rely on the same tools in far more consequential ways with little transparency or accountability.

This is problematic for three reasons. First, it undermines the ethical consistency of academic integrity regimes. If integrity is treated mainly as a student matter, institutions ignore the fact that staff use of AI can also affect originality, authorship, accuracy, and accountability. Second, it exposes a policy vacuum. Many universities have rules for student use, but far less clarity on whether staff must disclose AI use in scholarly writing, how much use is acceptable, or what counts as ethical versus excessive reliance. Third, it risks weakening trust in academic work itself. If institutions police students rigorously while remaining vague about staff use of AI in publications and research processes, they send the message that transparency is compulsory for the less powerful and optional for the more powerful.

What is emerging in some universities is not a coherent ethics of AI use, but a hierarchy of suspicion. In addition, most universities still lack clear precedent on what should count as acceptable use, sufficient disclosure, or ethical authorship for academic staff.

Observation 2: The rise of the AI expert (Snake Oil Experts)

While higher education staff must engage with AI-related developments to remain responsive to issues shaping their work and institutions, public and institutional discourse on AI has also been marked by hype, inflated claims, and commentary that often exceeds technical understanding. As Hal Daumé has observed, "There's a lot of AI snake oil out there," a warning that many public conversations about AI do not accurately reflect either the technology's capabilities or its limitations (University of Maryland 2023). In South African higher education, there has been a notable surge in AI-related scholarship since 2023, both conceptual and empirical, and this work has been important in helping the sector think through the pedagogical, ethical, and governance implications of generative AI. Yet the rapid expansion of AI discussion has also produced a troubling side effect: the emergence of a growing class of self-styled AI authorities whose confidence in speaking about the technology is not always matched by formal preparation or technical insight. They, nevertheless, set themselves as experts amongst the variety of stakeholders involved in policy decision-making, shaping a powerful orchestration of the higher education landscape.

This is a problem for at least four reasons. First, when commentary is not grounded in a clear understanding of how AI systems work, what data they rely on, and where their limitations lie, institutional conversations can become shaped by exaggeration rather than evidence. Second, such voices may influence policy and practice on matters such as assessment, curriculum, academic integrity, privacy, and procurement without sufficient

appreciation of the risks involved. Third, they may contribute to a shallow form of AI literacy in the sector, where confidence and visibility are mistaken for expertise, and where critical engagement with the technology is displaced by trend-driven enthusiasm (UNESCO, 2025). Fourth, in the South African context, uncritical AI advocacy risks obscuring the structural realities within which universities operate, including inequality, uneven digital readiness, resource constraints, and differing institutional capacities (Mogoale, Pretorius, Mogase and Segooa 2025). Opinions and experimentation are necessary in any emerging field, but when underqualified authority begins to shape the terms of debate, the sector risks making consequential decisions based on hype rather than informed judgment.

The issue is not that only computer scientists should speak about AI, but that institutional authority on AI should not be claimed by those whose expertise exceeds their technical, pedagogical, or ethical grounding. Higher education does not need more AI evangelists; it needs more intellectually honest, context-sensitive, and critically informed engagement with the technology.

Observation 3: Institutional silos and the cost of competition (Hoarders and Competitors)

A further observation and concern is that South African universities continue to operate too often in silos, even when the challenges they face are clearly collective. This is not accidental. It is partly a rational response to an institutional environment shaped by neoliberal logics, where universities are encouraged to compete for prestige, rankings, resources, partnerships, and visibility rather than to collaborate in ways that strengthen the sector as a whole.

In such a context, institutional competition can appear sensible, even necessary. Universities are pushed to differentiate themselves, protect their reputations, and pursue strategic advantage in an increasingly marketised higher education landscape. Yet what may be rational at the level of the individual institution can be damaging at the level of the system. When institutions work in isolation, they duplicate effort, hoard expertise, and miss opportunities to develop collective responses to shared problems such as AI governance, digital inequality, staff development, curriculum reform, and ethical policy design.

The result is a sector that often moves more slowly than it should. Instead of pooling knowledge, building common frameworks, and learning across institutional boundaries, universities may end up reproducing fragmented and uneven responses. This is especially troubling in South Africa, where the inequalities between institutions are already pronounced and where collaboration could help distribute capacity more fairly across the sector. There is

power in numbers, and the future of higher education in the country will depend not only on what individual universities can do alone, but on what they are willing to do together.

If South African universities keep competing in silos, they will lose together because a fragmented sector cannot meet a collective future.

These observations provide an important backdrop for reading the contributions in this Special Issue, which illuminate many of the pedagogical, ethical, and governance questions now confronting higher education.

SPECIAL ISSUE CONTRIBUTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SILENCES

In this Special Issue, the contributors make several important points and raise critical concerns and challenges regarding AI in the Global South.

Dhunpath's (2026) conceptual article extends institutional isomorphism theory to explain how AI intensified conformity and dysfunction in South African Universities. He argues that AI not only accelerates existing institutional pressures but also embeds them in a technical fashion, creating what he calls an *algorithmic decoupling*. In this process, universities may profess transformation while adopting opaque systems that mimic and reproduce Global North norms, managerialism and colonial epistemic hierarchies. Dhunpath warns that AI can silently hard-code legitimacy-seeking behaviour into university processes such as admissions, research metrics, governance and curriculum. By doing so, it deepens the gap between stated values and actual educational practices. He recommends counter-isomorphic leadership, procurement frameworks tied to pedagogical value, broader stakeholder participation in governance, and investment in locally trained AI models. More importantly, he advocates for the explicit protection of irreducibly human domains such as academic judgement and pedagogy.

The conceptual article by Lombard and Jamal (2026) uses autoethnography and Islamic Liberation Theology as an analytic lens to argue that standard AI ethics frameworks are too procedural and Western to address the lived realities of marginalisation in South African higher education. For this reason, they argue, ethical AI must begin from the standpoint of the poor, the excluded, and the epistemically erased. As such, the main recommendation is to define ethical AI as a concern for marginalised and underrepresented groups.

Prakaschandra and Chitanand's (2026) article comprises personal narratives, critical conversations, and a student interview in health science education. The authors argue that AI functions as a pedagogical *border zone* and a *pharmakon*, thereby simultaneously widening access and deepening epistemic injustice. This is especially true when colonial language norms and unequal educational histories shape student participation. The article recommends decolonial AI literacy, assessment redesign that includes reflective or oral components, teacher

professional development and communities of practice. By doing so, AI becomes a scaffold for learning rather than a crutch or mechanism of epistemic conformity.

Ng'ambi and Van der Merwe's (2026) qualitative empirical study is based on classroom teaching in a South African Grade 9 mathematics setting. The study used 40 AI-learner chat transcripts analysed using Computational Grounded Theory. Their main argument is that GenAI can support learning and serve as a knowledgeable other, but only when curriculum design creates the conditions for meaningful dialogue. The key contribution of this article is the Domino Effect Framework and the SMART critical AI literacy model. The recommendations are oriented towards curriculum redesign, teacher professional development and explicit attention to data sovereignty and the political economy.

Auld's (2026) qualitative, participatory arts-based study, conducted with 12 postgraduate psychology students, analyses graffiti incorporating AI tools. Her main argument is that AI can support decolonial psychological education only when it is carefully constrained and subordinated to humans, and when its interpretation is historically situated rather than treated as a neutral or authoritative source of knowledge. The contribution highlights that graffiti allowed students to engage with issues such as environmental crises in the Anthropocene and migration, but also notes AI's Eurocentric tendencies. She recommends using low-cost AI only in bounded ways and developing institutional policies that support reflexive, multilingual, context-sensitive use of AI.

West's (2026) study involved 250 preservice teachers, of whom 201 submitted reflective and AI-assisted digital storybooks, and was supplemented by expert interviews. The central argument of her article is that AI-generated children's literature becomes educationally legitimate only when preservice teachers can demonstrate governance competency. Despite the study showing that students noted AI was only a support tool, many listed AI as a co-author and relied too heavily on AI-generated outputs. West recommends that initial teacher education programmes provide a space for explicit training in human-machine teaming, promote literacy, and support accountable digital practices.

The last article by Makwakwa and Thobejane (2026) is an empirical qualitative case study of a large ODeL teacher-education statistics module, drawing on 3,088 student submissions, a purposive sample of 229 scripts, and marker reflections. These authors posit that AI-related academic problems in resource-constrained settings cannot be reduced to individual cheating, as they arise from a socio-technical misalignment across assessment design, policy, digital literacy, and equity accommodations. The study found that AI-shaped graphs, formulaic calculations, handwritten or scanned submissions that evade similarity detection, and EULA non-acceptance expose the tension between inclusion and enforcement. They recommend

inclusive but consistent integrity pathways, stronger staff and student digital/AI literacy, assessment redesign that privileges reasoning and interpretation, and tighter alignment between equity commitments, policy, and integrity governance.

All seven articles in this Special Issue reject the idea that AI is neutral or universal and argue that AI use should be mediated and interpreted through Global South realities. It does not matter what the discourse is, health, education or art, contextual judgment and reflexive pedagogy is critical when navigating these emerging technologies. These articles also caution against simple binaries (e.g., AI is bad or AI is good) and instead, they call for bounded, purposeful and accountable integration. What emerged very strongly from this collection is the focus on equity and epistemic justice. The authors agree that these should be treated as foundational, not optional, when using AI tools.

Combined, these articles highlight six critical recommendations for AI use in higher education in the Global South:

- There is a need to redesign assessment to foreground reasoning, reflection, oral defence, critique and contextual interpretation, over outputs alone (West 2026).
- We need to professionally develop AI literacy skills for students and staff that focus on ethical use, biases, and verification processes (Prakaschandra and Chitanand 2026).
- We need to create governance frameworks that are locally grounded, justice-oriented and attentive to structural inequality (Dhunpath 2026).
- We need to preserve human agency and professional judgement (Lombard and Jamal 2026)
- We need to use AI in a bounded, transparent and auditable way that supports participation without displacing ownership (West 2026)
- We need to exploit the potential of GenAI as a "more knowledgeable other" to enhance student's personalised learning (Ng'ambi and Van der Merwe 2026)

However, whilst these insights are useful and contribute to the discourse, there are also glaring silences that need to be noted. For example, none of the articles explicitly address disability, accessibility, student mental health, labour exploitation, state dependency on foreign platforms and most importantly, the environmental costs of AI use. Encouraging AI use has huge environmental repercussions that need to be unpacked – especially in the era of the Anthropocene. Another silence from this compilation is, unfortunately, the geographical representation. While the call did encourage applications from the Global South, the submissions suitable for inclusion were mainly South African, and these insights are

insufficient to represent the whole. As such, future research will need to stimulate comparative multi-country studies, longitudinal work, and the critical issue of technological dependence on Global North platforms and their implications. In addition, future research should foreground underrepresented groups and directly ask who benefits, who is burdened, and what kind of knowledge is visibilised or erased. At the same time, the significance of the Special Issue lies not only in what it addresses, but also in its interventions and in the silence, it forces the field to confront.

A POST AI ADOPTION AGENDA IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

A meaningful post-adoption agenda for higher education in the Global South must move beyond questions of adoption and experimentation toward deeper concerns about governance, justice, capacity, and collective responsibility.

AI governance and accountability should be treated as a central priority, including clear rules on staff and student use, disclosure, authorship, assessment, procurement, privacy, and institutional responsibility (Ajayi and Aleji 2026). Broader analysis of how policymaking decisions (about programmes and practices) are being developed at institutional, national and continental levels should become a more assertive research focus to analyse the epistemic ecologies of differential powers across and between northern and southern spaces.

Equity and digital justice must remain central to this agenda, particularly in contexts where AI may deepen existing inequalities in access, language, infrastructure, disability support, and institutional capacity (Maimela and Mbonde 2025).

AI literacy and staff development should move beyond short-term experimentation toward sustained capacity-building for academics, professional staff, and students, enabling more critical, informed, and context-sensitive engagement with AI tools (Khoza and Van der Walt 2025).

Curriculum and knowledge production also require urgent attention, especially regarding how AI may reshape disciplinary knowledge, research practices, graduate attributes, and the politics of knowledge in African universities (Maimela and Mbonde 2025).

Public-interest collaboration should be prioritised through stronger inter-university and regional cooperation, rather than fragmented institution-by-institution responses that duplicate effort and intensify inequality across the sector (UNESCO 2026a).

Lastly, and probably most importantly, environmental sustainability and resource justice must become a central part of any post-adoption agenda. Discussions of AI in higher education too often focus on innovation, productivity, and digital transformation while neglecting the material infrastructures that enable AI. Yet AI systems depend on resource-

intensive computation and data infrastructures that consume significant amounts of electricity and water, raising serious questions about sustainability in contexts already marked by energy insecurity, water stress, and infrastructural inequality. In South Africa and across the African continent, where universities operate amid rolling electricity pressures, uneven digital infrastructure, and broader environmental vulnerability, it is not enough to ask what AI can do. Institutions must also ask what AI costs materially, who bears those costs, and whether its adoption is compatible with just and sustainable futures. In this context, environmental sustainability should not be treated as a secondary concern, but as a core governance issue in decisions about AI procurement, deployment, and scale (Marwala 2025; UNRIC 2025; UNESCO 2026b).

CONCLUSION

The article's editorial insights argue that AI in Global South higher education should not be approached as a straightforward story of innovation, disruption, or progress, but as a dense social field in which multiple actors contest meaning, authority, responsibility, and benefits. Across this field, the figures that emerge, police and culprits, silent shapers, technophiles, practitioners, hoarders, competitors, saviours, colluders, and snake-oil experts, are not merely rhetorical devices, but indicators of a sector negotiating uncertainty, power, and legitimacy in real time. Read together, the articles in this Special Issue show that the central challenge is not adoption itself, but the terms on which adoption takes place: whose knowledge is legitimised, whose interests are served, who bears the costs, and who retains agency in shaping technological futures. The contributions resist simple pro- or anti-AI positions and instead call for pedagogically purposeful, ethically bounded, and politically conscious forms of engagement that foreground equity, contextual judgement, and epistemic justice.

What emerges is a messy and unfinished terrain rather than a settled roadmap. Yet, this complexity is precisely why higher education in the Global South must exercise greater deliberative agency. They should do so not as passive recipients of imported technological agendas, but as active shapers of AI futures rooted in local realities, collective responsibility, and sustainable, just forms of educational possibility.

If AI becomes just another vehicle for inherited hierarchies, then higher education will have digitised injustice in the name of progress. In essence, what is at stake is not simply adoption, but whether universities will reproduce the future they inherited, or author one that finally speaks in their own voice.

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