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## Leadership and Learning in the Age of AI: Fostering Inclusive, Ethical, and Human-Centered Transformation

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## Ηγεσία και Μάθηση στην Εποχή της Τεχνητής Νοημοσύνης: Προώθηση ενός Συμπεριληπτικού, Ηθικού και Ανθρωποκεντρικού Μετασχηματισμού

### Leadership and Learning in the Age of AI: Fostering Inclusive, Ethical, and Human-Centered Transformation

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#### **Abstract**

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the educational landscape with transformative force, enabling new possibilities while exposing deep systemic vulnerabilities. AI offers enhanced personalization, predictive learning analytics, and broader participation in lifelong learning, but it also raises significant ethical, pedagogical, and governance challenges. This article presents an integrated theoretical and conceptual analysis of how leadership and learning must evolve in the age of AI. Positioned at the intersection of global policy frameworks, leadership theory, ethics, and open education, the article advances a holistic vision for human-centered AI transformation in education. Drawing on the author's Leadership Through Uncertainty model – anchored in cultures of care, curiosity, and challenge – the analysis argues that leadership in AI-rich environments must be distributed, ethical, glocalized, and grounded in inclusive lifelong learning ecosystems. The article synthesizes conceptual foundations, empirical insights, and institutional examples to propose a roadmap for responsible, inclusive, equitable, scalable, and sustainable AI integration across educational systems. Ultimately, it positions educational leadership as a moral, philosophical, and systemic act essential to ensuring that AI enhances, rather than undermines, human agency, dignity, and flourishing.

## **Keywords**

AI in education, leadership, care, curiosity, challenges, inclusion, scalability, sustainability

## **Introduction**

Education is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the accelerating influence of artificial intelligence (AI) and the broader digital ecosystems in which it is embedded. Earlier waves of digital innovation – such as learning management systems, online learning platforms, and multimedia educational environments – reshaped how learners accessed information and participated in instruction. However, AI introduces a qualitatively different form of change. AI systems not only deliver content or support communication; they increasingly perform cognitive, analytical, and generative functions traditionally associated with teachers, administrators, and learners. As a result, AI disrupts established assumptions about pedagogy, assessment, governance, ethics, and the purposes of education. Educational leaders and policymakers now face an urgent responsibility to navigate these transformations in ways that uphold human dignity, foster inclusion, and ensure that technological progress aligns with societal and educational values.

Global policy organizations have highlighted both the opportunities and dangers of AI. UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) states that humanity stands at a crossroads and must create a new social contract for education – one based on equity, human rights, and sustainability. This vision acknowledges that AI can enable more personalized learning, expand access, transform assessment practices, and reduce administrative burdens. However, it also recognizes significant risks: datafication of learners, increased surveillance, loss of pedagogical autonomy, widening inequalities, and threats to privacy and democratic participation. Similarly, the OECD's (2023) policy guidance on AI in education emphasizes that AI cannot be considered a neutral tool. AI systems are shaped by assumptions in their training data, influenced by power relations in global technology ecosystems, and likely to amplify existing social inequities. For these reasons, the OECD maintains that AI must be governed as a public good and implemented within strong ethical, regulatory, and institutional

frameworks. Nowhere is the need for such oversight more evident than in the European Commission's AI Act (2024), the first comprehensive legal framework regulating high-risk AI systems. Education is explicitly identified as a domain requiring heightened protections, given that AI-enabled assessment, monitoring, and learner profiling can have long-term effects on individuals' educational and professional futures. The AI Act mandates transparency, human oversight, bias mitigation, documentation, and ongoing evaluation of AI systems used in education. These global and regional frameworks collectively signal a crucial shift: AI in education is no longer an experimental or optional addition but a regulated, ethically significant component of educational systems. In this context, leadership becomes both more complex and more essential. Educational leadership has traditionally operated within relatively stable paradigms – administrative, managerial, or hierarchical models that emphasize compliance, order, and continuity. However, AI-driven transformation disrupts these paradigms. The introduction of predictive analytics, generative AI, automated assessment, immersive simulations, and algorithmic decision-making brings epistemic uncertainty, ethical ambiguity, and sociotechnical complexity. Leaders must now make decisions where implications are unclear, evidence is evolving, and ethical stakes are high. In the theory of adaptive leadership, some challenges require technical expertise, while others demand mobilizing people to confront uncertainty, question assumptions, and co-create new solutions. AI clearly falls into the latter category. It requires leaders to move beyond routine problem-solving toward adaptive, reflective, collaborative, and ethically grounded practice.

This article presents leadership not merely as an administrative function but as a moral, philosophical, and systemic act. The rise of AI demands leadership grounded in human-centered values and capable of integrating diverse forms of knowledge – technical, pedagogical, ethical, cultural, and experiential. Drawing on Senge's (2006) concept of the learning organization, educational institutions must foster cultures of shared inquiry, collective intelligence, and continual learning. AI heightens this need, as its effective and ethical implementation depends on institutions' ability to reflect critically on its impacts, adapt to new insights, and engage stakeholders in meaningful dialogue and decision-making. Leadership should therefore be distributed rather than

concentrated, incorporating the perspectives of educators, learners, AI specialists, ethicists, and community members.

This introduction frames the central question that guides the article: How can leadership and learning evolve toward inclusive, ethical, and human-centered transformation in the age of AI? Answering this question requires integrating theoretical foundations, global policy frameworks, leadership theory, pedagogical innovation, ethical reasoning, and institutional strategy. It calls for a glocal approach – one that aligns global ethical standards with local cultural, social, and infrastructural realities. It also requires a commitment to open education, lifelong learning, sustainability, and human rights. The author’s conceptual model, Leadership Through Uncertainty, offers a useful framework for understanding how leaders can navigate AI-driven transformation while upholding human dignity, fostering resilience, and sustaining ethical action. The model consists of three interdependent cultures – care, curiosity, and challenge – that together support the creation of inclusive, adaptive, and morally grounded learning environments. A Culture of Care prioritizes empathy, equity, and relational ethics, requiring leaders to ensure that AI serves the well-being of learners and does not exacerbate inequality or exploitation. A Culture of Curiosity encourages inquiry, open-mindedness, experimentation, and a willingness to engage critically with new technologies. A Culture of Challenge cultivates resilience, ethical courage, and the capacity to confront power dynamics, systemic inequities, and the complex dilemmas introduced by AI. Together, these cultures form a triadic foundation for leadership capable of guiding educational institutions through profound uncertainty and transformation. The following sections present a comprehensive argument for a new paradigm of leadership and learning – one that views AI not as a technological inevitability but as a sociotechnical phenomenon whose value depends entirely on human intention, governance, and collective action.

### **Theoretical foundations**

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence in education requires a strong theoretical foundation to understand not only its technological capabilities but also its epistemological, ethical, and pedagogical implications. AI does not simply introduce new tools to existing educational models; it reshapes fundamental assumptions about

knowledge production, learning processes, human agency, and institutional governance. To respond effectively, educational leadership must draw on theories from the learning sciences, epistemology, sociology, critical data studies, and leadership theory. This section examines the theoretical foundations underlying the transformation of education in the age of AI, showing how traditional paradigms are being challenged and why new conceptual approaches are necessary.

At the core of educational theory is the constructivist view that learners actively build knowledge through experience, reflection, and social interaction. Constructivism emphasizes agency, dialogue, and the co-creation of meaning – elements that AI can either strengthen or undermine, depending on its use. AI-enabled adaptive systems may support constructivist learning by providing personalized scaffolding, but they risk narrowing learning experiences to predefined pathways shaped by algorithmic predictions rather than learner choice or inquiry. This concern aligns with Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which highlights that learning emerges through mediated interaction within cultural contexts. As a new mediating tool, AI changes the relational dynamics among learners, educators, and knowledge. If used without ethical guidance, AI may replace rich relational exchanges with automated interactions that lack nuance, empathy, and contextual understanding. Therefore, theoretical clarity is essential to ensure that AI amplifies rather than diminishes sociocultural and constructivist principles. Connectivism (Siemens, 2013; Downes, 2012) offers another important perspective. It conceptualizes learning as the formation and navigation of networks that include human actors, digital systems, and informational nodes. From this perspective, AI becomes a participant within learning networks, filtering data, identifying patterns, and generating new content. This reconceptualization challenges older models that treat technology as external to learning. Instead, AI's expanding cognitive and generative capacities make it an active partner in shaping learning experiences. While connectivism recognizes the distributed nature of knowledge, it also raises questions about whose knowledge is privileged within algorithmic systems and how power, culture, and economic interests shape digital infrastructures. Crawford's (2021) analysis of data supply chains highlights that AI depends on extractive practices, both environmental and social, making critical data literacy essential for understanding AI's true impact. In parallel, epistemological debates

highlight AI's potential to alter the nature of knowledge itself. Traditionally, educational systems have relied on human judgment to validate knowledge, contextualize information, and determine relevance. AI disrupts this by generating content, making predictions, and offering recommendations with increasing fluency. While generative AI models can synthesize information at scale, they also risk producing inaccuracies, fabrications, and biases embedded in their training data. Philosophically, this challenges distinctions between knowing and processing, and between truth and pattern recognition. Leaders must therefore cultivate epistemic vigilance across institutions, ensuring that human interpretation, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning remain central to learning, even as AI becomes more sophisticated. Critical pedagogy also provides essential insights. Freirean perspectives emphasize empowerment, reflection, and the ability to question dominant narratives. AI systems, often developed by a small number of large corporations, risk reinforcing hegemonic perspectives unless learners and educators are prepared to examine how algorithms function, whose interests they serve, and what assumptions they encode. AI can either democratize knowledge creation or deepen existing inequalities, depending on how leadership configures its use. A critical pedagogical lens ensures that educational institutions do not treat AI as neutral but recognize its potential to shape ideology, discourse, and social power.

Leadership theory adds another dimension to these foundations. Traditional models that emphasize control, predictability, and top-down decision-making are inadequate in environments marked by rapid technological change, uncertainty, and ethical complexity. Instead, adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994) is essential. Adaptive leaders mobilize communities to address challenges without clear solutions, fostering collective learning and resilience. In AI-rich contexts, this means acknowledging uncertainty, encouraging experimentation, and creating spaces where stakeholders can openly and critically examine the implications of AI. Distributed leadership (Harris, 2014; Spillane, 2006) underscores the need for shared decision-making. AI implementation cannot be managed solely by technical experts or administrators; it requires inclusive governance involving educators, students, policy actors, ethicists, and IT specialists. Complex decisions – such as whether to adopt a predictive analytics platform, how to assess bias, or how to protect learner privacy – demand diverse

perspectives. Distributed leadership ensures that responsibility for AI governance is shared, transparent, and informed by context. Complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) provides an essential foundation. Educational institutions function as complex adaptive systems with dynamic interactions across multiple levels: pedagogical, administrative, technological, cultural, and societal. AI adds to this complexity by introducing new forms of interdependence, unpredictability, and feedback. Complexity leadership emphasizes enabling structures, emergent learning, and flexibility. Leaders should not treat AI implementation as a linear, technical project; instead, they should cultivate adaptive capacity, foster innovation, and create generative environments where solutions evolve through interaction and reflection.

### **Leadership in the age of AI**

Leadership in the age of artificial intelligence requires a fundamental rethinking of both the nature of leadership and the role of educational institutions in society. Traditional leadership models emphasized authority, hierarchy, and administrative control, but AI introduces unprecedented ethical, pedagogical, and systemic complexity. Leaders now guide institutions through environments where technologies operate with semi-autonomous capabilities, data-driven predictions influence decisions, and pedagogical relationships are increasingly mediated by algorithms. As a result, educational leadership is no longer simply a matter of policy implementation or organizational management; it becomes a deeply philosophical and moral act grounded in the protection of human dignity and the cultivation of equitable, just, and flourishing learning environments. Effective leadership in AI-rich environments begins with a clear moral purpose. Michael Fullan (2021) argues that meaningful educational change must be anchored in values that transcend technology, such as equity, human development, and social responsibility. In AI contexts, this moral purpose becomes even more urgent because the potential harms of unregulated AI – bias, surveillance, exclusion, and loss of agency – can profoundly impact learners' lives. Ethical leadership requires that decisions about AI not be delegated solely to vendors, algorithms, or technical teams. Instead, leaders must ensure that institutional missions, ethical commitments, and educational philosophies guide the selection, implementation, and evaluation of AI tools. For example, a predictive analytics system that identifies

students “at risk” must be carefully scrutinized for bias and used to support, not stigmatize, learners. Leadership rooted in moral purpose serves as a compass for navigating the uncertainty and complexity associated with AI. Adaptive leadership theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding the demands placed on leaders in AI-enabled environments. Heifetz (1994) distinguishes between technical problems, which can be solved with existing expertise and procedures, and adaptive challenges, which require learning, experimentation, and shifts in values and mindsets. AI represents a quintessential adaptive challenge: it cannot be addressed solely by acquiring new technologies or adopting prepackaged solutions. Instead, institutions must engage in collective learning to understand AI’s implications, navigate ethical dilemmas, and restructure practices to align with human-centered values. Adaptive leadership requires humility, openness to diverse perspectives, and the ability to mobilize communities around shared challenges. Leaders must create spaces for dialogue where educators, learners, and stakeholders can examine AI’s role, raise concerns, and co-create responses. This approach contrasts sharply with technocentric leadership that imposes solutions without considering context or consequences. Distributed leadership further strengthens institutional capacity by recognizing that AI governance cannot be centralized in a single role or office. Harris (2014) and Spillane (2006) demonstrate that leadership emerges from interactions among individuals, teams, and systems. In AI contexts, this distributed approach is essential because effective governance requires expertise in pedagogy, ethics, data science, accessibility, legal compliance, and cultural context. Institutions that rely solely on technical teams risk overlooking social and ethical dimensions, while those that rely solely on educators may lack necessary technical insight. Distributed leadership addresses these gaps by establishing cross-functional governance teams, ethical advisory boards, AI literacy initiatives, and participatory decision-making structures. This ensures that AI adoption is transparent, inclusive, and aligned with institutional values.

The author’s model of Leadership Through Uncertainty presents a culturally grounded, human-centered framework for navigating AI transformation, see Fig 1 and 2. The model’s three interdependent cultures – care, curiosity, and challenge – offer an integrated approach to cultivating ethical, reflective, and resilient organizations. A

Culture of Care emphasizes empathy, equity, and relational ethics, reminding leaders that technology must serve the well-being of learners and educators. Care-driven leadership resists harmful monitoring, protects privacy, and ensures that AI enhances rather than diminishes human relationships. A Culture of Curiosity supports exploration, interdisciplinary inquiry, and continuous learning. Leaders who embody curiosity encourage staff and learners to experiment with AI while maintaining critical awareness of its limitations, biases, and ethical implications. A Culture of Challenge fosters resilience and ethical courage, enabling leaders to confront systemic inequities, question power asymmetries embedded in AI systems, and resist reductionist narratives that portray AI as inevitable or infallible. Together, these cultures provide a roadmap for leadership that is adaptive, principled, and oriented toward human flourishing. Overlaying these theoretical perspectives is the framework of open education, which closely aligns with human-centered, ethical AI adoption. Open educational resources (OER), open scholarship, and open data practices promote transparency, collaboration, and participation. Several of the largest international organizations, including ICDE and EDEN DLE, emphasize that open ecosystems counterbalance proprietary systems that might otherwise monopolize digital infrastructures, restrict access, or obscure decision-making. The principles of openness also reinforce glocalization – a recognition that global frameworks such as UNESCO’s ethical guidelines or the OECD’s AI principles must be adapted to local cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts. Openness enables institutions to customize AI tools, create culturally relevant content, and ensure accessibility for diverse learners.



**Picture 1:** The Leadership through uncertainty model (Ossiannilsson, E.)



**Picture 2:** The Three Cs framework for inclusion, scalable and sustainable education

Taken together, these theoretical foundations demonstrate that AI’s role in education is as much philosophical and ethical as it is technological. AI compels institutions to reconsider assumptions about learning, leadership, equity, and knowledge. The theories discussed here are not abstract; they provide practical guidance for designing governance structures, pedagogical strategies, and leadership practices that uphold human-centered values. Without such grounding, AI risks becoming a tool of surveillance, inequity, and epistemic narrowing. With it, AI can support rich, inclusive,

resilient, and transformative learning ecosystems governed by ethical, reflective, and courageous leadership.

### **Learning in the age of AI**

Artificial intelligence is transforming learning at structural, pedagogical, and epistemological levels. Unlike earlier technologies that supplemented instruction, AI actively participates in cognition, reasoning, feedback, and knowledge representation. It analyzes learner behavior, predicts progress, generates content, and constructs learning pathways. These functions shift the landscape from content delivery to dynamic, data-informed learning ecosystems. However, they also introduce tensions regarding agency, autonomy, equity, and the nature of human learning. Understanding learning in the age of AI therefore requires examining not only technological potential but also the cognitive, social, and ethical implications for both learners and educators.

A central theme in contemporary debates is the shift from personalized learning to what scholars increasingly call human–AI co-agency. Traditional personalization models adjust pace, sequence, or difficulty based on learner data. While valuable, this approach often assumes that optimal learning can be determined algorithmically. It risks reducing learners to behavioral data points and framing learning as an optimization problem rather than a human process shaped by curiosity, emotion, culture, and identity. In contrast, co-agency positions learners as active partners who evaluate, question, and shape the role of AI in their learning. It emphasizes metacognitive development – helping learners understand not only what they are learning but also how they are learning and how AI influences that process. Luckin’s (2022) work on intelligence augmentation captures this shift by framing AI as a cognitive partner that can scaffold reflection, deepen inquiry, and support novel problem-solving. Learning in the age of AI also requires developing the ability to navigate uncertainty. UNESCO (2023) notes that increasingly complex societal challenges – such as climate change, digitalization, geopolitical tension, and rapid technological disruption – demand adaptive, future-oriented competencies. AI intensifies this need by making the information environment more dynamic and less predictable. Learners must be able to evaluate conflicting information, detect bias,

recognize algorithmic influence, and tolerate ambiguity. These abilities do not develop from static curricula; they require pedagogies based on inquiry, dialogue, creativity, and interdisciplinary exploration. Therefore, AI should not simply automate learning tasks but should serve as a catalyst for fostering deeper understanding, ethical awareness, and critical reasoning. Another major dimension of learning in AI-rich environments is the role of educators. Predictions that AI would replace teachers have not materialized; instead, the opposite has occurred. AI has increased the importance of educators by shifting their roles toward design, facilitation, coaching, and ethical mediation. Rather than simply delivering information – which AI can already do at scale – educators help learners interpret AI outputs, develop critical perspectives, make ethical judgments, and navigate complex socio-technical environments. Educators also provide the relational and emotional components of learning that AI cannot replicate: encouragement, empathy, contextual understanding, and emotional support. These aspects are especially important for learners facing barriers related to disability, socioeconomic status, cultural exclusion, or trauma. In this way, AI expands, rather than diminishes, the professional identity of educators. However, AI also challenges educators' confidence and sense of agency. Many educators feel unprepared to use AI tools, uncertain about ethical implications, or overwhelmed by rapidly evolving technologies. Leadership has an obligation to create professional learning environments that foster AI literacy, ethical understanding, and pedagogical innovation. Professional development should not treat AI as merely a technical skill to be mastered but as a pedagogical and ethical domain requiring reflection, collaboration, and experimentation. UNESCO and OECD frameworks emphasize the importance of empowering educators to be co-designers of AI practices, not passive recipients of externally imposed tools. When educators have agency and confidence, AI adoption becomes more thoughtful, equitable, and aligned with local needs.

Learning in the age of AI must be examined through the lens of equity and inclusion. AI has the potential to transform access to education for individuals historically underserved by traditional systems. AI-powered translation tools can support multilingual learning, adaptive interfaces can enhance accessibility for learners with disabilities, and intelligent tutoring systems can provide individualized support to those who lack personalized feedback in overcrowded classrooms. AI may also help

create flexible learning pathways for adult learners, migrants, refugees, and individuals in remote or resource-constrained environments. These possibilities align with UNESCO's commitment to universal access, lifelong learning, and human rights. Yet the risks are equally significant. AI systems may reproduce bias, reinforce stereotypes, and create new inequalities. Learners without access to devices, connectivity, or digital skills may benefit least from AI-enhanced environments. Predictive analytics used to identify "at-risk students" may disproportionately flag disadvantaged learners, leading to stigmatization or lowered expectations. Automated assessment systems may misinterpret culturally diverse communication styles or linguistic patterns. Surveillance-heavy tools, such as AI proctoring systems, may disproportionately harm neurodivergent learners, gender-nonconforming students, or individuals uncomfortable with constant monitoring. Without careful leadership, AI could increase the educational stratification it claims to address. To address these risks, leaders must integrate ethical design principles – including transparency, fairness, accessibility, explainability, and human oversight – into all AI-related learning processes. Leaders should also implement glocalization strategies that adapt global AI frameworks to local cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural contexts. For example, while UNESCO sets global standards for AI ethics, institutions need to interpret and apply these principles in culturally relevant ways. AI literacy programs should consider local languages, traditions, and learners' lived experiences. AI tools must be evaluated for cultural relevance and contextual appropriateness, rather than presumed universal applicability.

Learning in the age of AI is closely connected to the principles of open education. Open educational resources (OER), open data, and open-source technologies promote transparency, collaboration, and adaptability, enhancing the capacity of learning systems to integrate AI responsibly. Open ecosystems reduce dependence on proprietary vendors, enable local customization, and support equity by expanding access to high-quality materials. OER-enabled AI systems can use openly licensed content to provide culturally responsive learning materials and multilingual support that reflect local priorities. ICDE and EDEN DLE emphasize that open education is essential for building sustainable, ethical AI ecosystems because openness counters the opacity and concentration of power often present in commercial AI platforms.

Open ecosystems also promote academic integrity by allowing institutions to audit algorithms, evaluate model assumptions, and contribute to shared knowledge production. Learning should be understood within the context of human development. AI should not reduce learning to measurable cognitive tasks but should expand its scope to include creativity, ethical reflection, collaboration, empathy, and civic engagement. These dimensions are essential to democratic societies and cannot be automated. UNESCO's vision for the future of education emphasizes the importance of cultivating collective intelligence – synergistic forms of learning in which humans and technologies collaborate to address complex societal challenges. AI can support these goals when integrated with care, curiosity, and challenge, but it must not overshadow the uniquely human aspects of learning. Learning in the age of AI represents both a promise and a responsibility. The promise is the potential for greater inclusion, personalization, accessibility, and innovation. The responsibility is to ensure that learning remains human-centered, equitable, contextual, and ethical. Leadership will determine whether AI amplifies or undermines these commitments.

### **Ethical & human-centered approaches**

Ethics is central to AI integration in education. While earlier technologies raised concerns primarily about access and quality, AI introduces fundamentally new ethical risks: algorithmic discrimination, surveillance, opacity, manipulation, and the potential erosion of human agency. These risks are not theoretical; they are actively shaping the educational landscape through predictive analytics, adaptive learning systems, automated assessment tools, and generative AI applications. To ensure that AI enhances rather than harms learning, educational systems must base decisions on robust ethical frameworks grounded in human rights, equity, and the preservation of human dignity. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) establishes a global foundation for ethical AI governance, emphasizing principles such as fairness, accountability, transparency, explainability, and human oversight. These principles reflect an understanding that AI systems can significantly influence identity formation, learning trajectories, and life opportunities. For example, an algorithm that predicts a learner's academic performance may be trained on biased datasets that reinforce historical inequities, or an automated essay-scoring tool may

privilege certain linguistic patterns while penalizing culturally diverse expressions. Without ethical safeguards, such systems can perpetuate injustice under the guise of objectivity. Therefore, educational institutions must adopt ethical frameworks that critically examine the assumptions embedded in AI systems and ensure they uphold learners' rights.

Central to ethical AI is the principle of fairness, which requires that AI systems do not discriminate based on race, gender, disability, language, or socioeconomic status. Fairness involves more than auditing outputs for bias; it also requires examining datasets, design processes, and intended use cases. Many AI tools used in education are developed in commercial contexts where diversity, cultural relevance, and accessibility may not be prioritized. Ethical leadership must therefore consider whether external tools align with local values and whether they inadvertently replicate social inequities. This requires diverse participation in AI decision-making, including voices from marginalized communities.

Transparency and explainability are essential. Learners and educators must understand how AI tools make decisions and what data they use. Opaque "black box" systems can undermine trust and deprive individuals of agency. If a student receives an automated recommendation or is flagged as "at risk," they should be able to contest or inquire about the basis for that decision. Transparent systems promote accountability and help institutions fulfill their ethical obligations to provide environments where learners can understand and influence the technologies that shape their futures. This aligns with UNESCO's emphasis on fostering AI literacy and critical awareness as essential components of ethical governance.

Privacy and data protection are also cornerstones of ethical AI. AI relies on large amounts of learner data, including behavioral patterns, academic history, biometric identifiers, and, in some cases, emotional cues. The use of such data raises serious concerns about dignity, autonomy, and consent. Data collected for educational purposes should never be repurposed for commercial gain or surveillance. However, many EdTech platforms operate under business models that monetize data or track learner behavior across environments. Ethical leadership must ensure that data practices comply not only with legal frameworks such as the GDPR but also with moral principles that prioritize the rights and welfare of learners. Consent must be genuine,

informed, and revocable; data collection should be minimized; and learners should have access to and control over their own information.

Another major ethical concern is surveillance. AI-driven proctoring tools, attendance systems, classroom monitoring technologies, and emotion-recognition software raise serious questions about autonomy, trust, and psychological safety. These tools can disproportionately impact learners from marginalized groups, neurodivergent students, or those uncomfortable with constant observation. Surveillance-oriented AI risks normalizing a culture of suspicion and eroding the relational trust essential for meaningful learning. Human-centered approaches require strong resistance to technologies that prioritize control over care, and leaders must critically evaluate whether such systems align with educational values or merely serve institutional convenience.

Ethical AI also requires understanding power dynamics. AI systems often reflect the values and assumptions of their creators, who are predominantly based in Western, English-speaking, corporate contexts. This concentration of technological power can result in digital colonialism, where global South contexts are expected to adopt tools developed without regard for local languages, worldviews, or educational traditions. Human-centered leadership must therefore insist on glocalization – translating global ethical principles into locally meaningful practices and resisting the imposition of universal technological frameworks that ignore cultural diversity. This includes supporting the development of local AI innovations, multilingual datasets, and culturally responsive systems.

Human-centered design offers a way to align AI with the lived experiences of learners and educators. Unlike techno-solutionist models that prioritize efficiency, human-centered design emphasizes empathy, inclusion, and co-creation. AI tools should be designed with learners, educators, and communities, not just for them. Participatory design processes help ensure that AI reflects local needs, addresses contextual inequities, and remains aligned with educational missions. This approach draws on principles from Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes flexibility, accessibility, and learner diversity. When AI systems are developed through human-centered processes, they are more likely to support meaningful learning and avoid harmful unintended consequences.

Ethics also requires fostering AI literacy across educational communities. AI literacy extends beyond technical understanding; it includes critical awareness of AI's limitations, biases, and societal impacts. Learners must be able to question algorithmic authority, recognize when AI exceeds its appropriate role, and understand when human judgment is necessary. Educators must understand how AI can support or distort pedagogy and how to guide learners in its responsible use. Leaders must be able to evaluate AI solutions from ethical, pedagogical, and cultural perspectives. AI literacy is a foundational requirement for democratic participation in digital societies and closely aligns with global efforts to cultivate critical digital competence. Ethics also requires attention to sustainability. AI's environmental footprint includes high energy consumption, resource extraction for hardware, and significant carbon emissions from training large models. Human-centered and planet-centered ethics are interconnected; responsible AI integration requires evaluating environmental impacts and seeking greener alternatives. Leaders must incorporate sustainability principles into procurement, infrastructure planning, and digital strategy, aligning with UNESCO's focus on education for sustainable futures. Ultimately, ethical and human-centered approaches to AI require more than compliance with standards – they require ethical courage, humility, and reflective practice. The Leadership Through Uncertainty model fosters this disposition by emphasizing care, curiosity, and challenge as guiding values. Care keeps humans at the center of educational decisions; curiosity drives inquiry into AI's potential and limitations; and challenge calls for resilience and moral courage when addressing systemic inequities or harmful technologies. Ethics is not a checklist but an ongoing practice embedded in the culture of institutions and their leadership.

Another aspect of human-centered approaches is supporting well-being. AI can cause cognitive overload, anxiety, or feelings of inadequacy when systems constantly measure performance or compare learners to algorithmic benchmarks. AI-based interventions must protect psychological safety and promote intrinsic motivation. Educational environments should encourage exploration, creativity, and viewing failure as a component of learning, rather than relying on algorithmic optimization and behavioral nudging. Leaders must resist pressures to adopt AI in ways that reduce learners to data profiles or prioritize quantifiable outputs over holistic development.

## **Policy and governance**

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly integrated into educational systems, the need for coherent, ethical, and contextually appropriate governance is paramount. Policy frameworks shape not only which AI tools are adopted but also how institutions conceptualize learning, autonomy, equity, accountability, and human rights. Governance is both a technical and moral responsibility. It requires balancing innovation with protection, opportunity with caution, and efficiency with ethical responsibility. This section examines how global, regional, and institutional governance mechanisms must evolve to guide AI integration responsibly and sustainably, emphasizing the importance of glocalization, ethical oversight, participatory decision-making, and institutional readiness. Global frameworks such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) and the OECD's AI Principles (2023) provide foundational guidance for the ethical deployment of AI in education. UNESCO's framework emphasizes human rights, sustainability, fairness, accountability, and transparency. It calls for AI that promotes human agency, cultural diversity, and linguistic inclusion, while warning against systems that reinforce bias, exacerbate inequality, or infringe on privacy. The OECD's principles similarly address fairness, transparency, robustness, and human-centered values. These global frameworks serve as normative anchors for national and institutional policymaking, ensuring that AI deployment aligns with shared global commitments to equity and human rights.

However, global principles must be adapted to local contexts through glocalization, a process that integrates global norms with culturally and institutionally specific realities. For example, while UNESCO emphasizes linguistic diversity, institutions must interpret this in relation to their local language profiles, minority groups, and pedagogical traditions. Similarly, ethical principles concerning bias require local definitions of what constitutes fairness in specific educational contexts. Glocalization ensures that AI governance remains relevant, culturally resonant, and sustainable. Without it, systems risk implementing generic solutions that fail to address local inequities or cultural nuances. Leadership is crucial for translating global frameworks into local policies that honor community values and educational aspirations. At the regional level, the European Union has taken a pioneering role in AI governance with

the adoption of the AI Act (2024), the world's first comprehensive regulatory framework for artificial intelligence. The AI Act classifies most educational AI systems as "high-risk," reflecting their potential to shape learners' futures, opportunities, and identities. High-risk systems – including automated assessment, learner analytics, and AI-proctored examinations – must meet strict requirements for accuracy, robustness, transparency, data governance, security, and human oversight. Institutions must maintain documentation, conduct risk assessments, and ensure that AI decisions remain contestable. The Act establishes a legal foundation for ethical AI adoption, signaling that education cannot be an unregulated playground for technological experimentation. Instead, AI deployment must be justified, monitored, and aligned with human rights obligations. National governments interpret and implement global and regional frameworks based on local governance traditions and policy priorities. For example, Finland's national AI literacy strategy emphasizes citizen empowerment, democratic participation, and lifelong learning. Singapore's roadmap highlights human–AI collaboration, educator professionalism, and continuous innovation. Canada focuses on public-sector transparency and equity-based assessment of AI impacts. These national strategies reflect diverse sociocultural contexts but share a commitment to human-centered governance and ethical oversight. For institutions, understanding national regulatory landscapes is essential for compliance and for leveraging support available through policy initiatives, training programs, and public-sector innovation funds. Institutional governance is the most immediate layer affecting educators and learners. Governance structures must address both strategic and operational aspects of AI integration. At the strategic level, institutions must define a clear vision for AI that aligns with their mission, values, and educational philosophy. This vision should address key questions: Why implement AI? Whom does it serve? What problems does it solve? What risks does it introduce? Institutions that adopt AI without such reflection risk drifting into reactive, vendor-driven strategies that prioritize convenience over ethics or pedagogy. Operational governance requires establishing procedures, committees, and oversight mechanisms to ensure ethical and effective implementation. Many institutions are forming AI ethics committees, data governance boards, and digital transformation councils. These groups bring together educators, technologists, ethicists, legal experts, accessibility specialists, and student

representatives to make informed decisions about AI procurement, deployment, monitoring, and evaluation. Governance committees ensure that AI use is transparent, participatory, and accountable, preventing unilateral decisions or unexamined assumptions from guiding practice. They also establish guidelines for the ethical use of generative AI in teaching, assessment, and research, helping educators navigate complex questions about authorship, academic integrity, and responsible use.

A key aspect of institutional governance is data governance. AI systems depend on data – often large amounts of personal, behavioral, and contextual information. Ethical data governance ensures that data collection is minimal, purposeful, secure, and respects learner rights. Institutions must establish clear policies on consent, data retention, data sharing, and learners’ rights to access and correct their information. Data infrastructure must include security measures to prevent breaches and misuse. Governance should also address algorithmic transparency, requiring vendors to disclose how their systems work, what data they use, and their limitations. Without strong data governance, AI risks becoming a tool for surveillance, commodification, or inequity. Institutional readiness is essential for effective governance. Many institutions lack the digital infrastructure, professional expertise, or financial resources needed to implement AI responsibly. Leadership should invest in AI literacy for educators, staff, and learners to ensure all stakeholders can engage critically with AI tools. Capacity building should include training in ethical decision-making, data privacy, algorithmic bias, and pedagogical integration. Institutions must also address infrastructural inequities by ensuring access to devices, connectivity, technical support, and accessible learning environments. Without readiness, institutions risk exacerbating inequalities or implementing AI in ways that undermine educational quality.

Another emerging governance challenge is maintaining academic integrity in the age of generative AI. Tools that produce essays, solve assignments, or generate complex code challenge traditional assessment models. Governance should shift from punitive surveillance approaches to pedagogical redesign. This includes developing authentic assessments that emphasize critical thinking, reflection, collaboration, and process-oriented learning. It also involves creating transparent policies to guide learners in

responsible AI use, emphasizing ethics, citation, and academic honesty rather than prohibition or fear.

International collaboration enhances governance capacity. Networks such as ICDE, EDEN Digital Learning Europe, and UNESCO's global coalitions support institutions by sharing resources, establishing benchmarks, fostering research, and promoting ethical standards. Cross-institutional collaborations, such as the European Universities Initiative, demonstrate how universities can jointly develop AI governance frameworks, share best practices, and build interoperable infrastructures grounded in ethical oversight and cultural diversity. Global networks are especially valuable for smaller institutions or those in low-resource contexts, helping them build capacity and participate in global digital transformation on equitable terms.

Governance for AI in education is not a one-time policy exercise but an ongoing process that requires vigilance, evaluation, and adaptation. As AI technologies evolve rapidly, governance must evolve with them. Policies should include mechanisms for continuous monitoring, stakeholder feedback, and periodic revision. Evaluating AI impacts – on equity, access, learning outcomes, well-being, and institutional culture – must be routine, informing decisions about scaling, modifying, or discontinuing AI systems. Governance grounded in care, curiosity, and challenge ensures that AI continues to serve human-centered educational purposes and remains aligned with the mission of fostering inclusive, equitable, and sustainable learning ecosystems.

### **Discussion & conclusion**

The integration of artificial intelligence into education represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of learning systems, institutions, and global policy. The rapid growth of AI demands not only technical solutions but also a fundamental reconsideration of educational purpose, leadership responsibilities, and ethical commitments. A central theme of this article is that AI's impact on education is not inherently positive or negative; rather, its effects depend on the values, frameworks, and governance structures that guide its implementation. This final section synthesizes the key concepts discussed and outlines the broader implications for leadership, learning, and policy in an era of rapid technological change. A key insight is that AI amplifies the interdependence between leadership and learning. Leaders are no longer responsible

solely for operational management or technological procurement. Instead, they serve as ethical stewards who cultivate cultures of care, curiosity, and challenge – cultures essential for navigating uncertainty and ensuring that AI supports human development. The Leadership Through Uncertainty model provides a conceptual anchor for this responsibility, offering leaders a coherent framework to balance innovation with ethical reflection and experimentation with accountability. Through these three interconnected cultures, leaders can foster environments in which AI promotes agency rather than dependency, empowerment rather than control, and inclusion rather than exclusion. The article also emphasizes that learning in the age of AI must extend beyond content mastery to include metacognition, critical digital literacy, and the ability to evaluate AI's influence on knowledge processes. Learners must understand how AI systems generate recommendations, what data they use, and how biases may affect their outputs. This form of literacy – AI literacy – is an essential component of democratic participation in digital societies. Without it, learners risk becoming passive consumers of algorithmically curated information. With it, they can engage critically, creatively, and ethically with AI systems, contributing to a more engaged and informed society.

A second major insight from this work is that the ethical challenges associated with AI are inseparable from questions of power. AI systems are not neutral; they reflect the values, assumptions, and economic interests of those who design and deploy them. Educational institutions must therefore cultivate critical awareness of the broader political economy of AI. Commercial platforms increasingly mediate learning, assessment, and communication, raising concerns about data extraction, surveillance, vendor lock-in, and the privatization of educational processes. Without deliberate governance, AI risks shifting control away from educational institutions toward private actors who may not prioritize equity, cultural diversity, or human development. Robust public policy, ethical procurement, and open technological ecosystems are essential to preserving education as a public good.

The third major insight concerns the importance of institutional culture. AI adoption does not occur in isolation; it takes root in cultures shaped by leadership values, educator beliefs, learner experiences, and long-standing organizational histories. Institutions with cultures of openness, collaboration, and critical inquiry are more

likely to adopt AI in thoughtful, ethical, and contextually appropriate ways. In contrast, institutions driven by efficiency metrics, accountability pressures, or authoritarian structures may adopt AI in ways that intensify surveillance, reduce autonomy, or reinforce inequities. The Leadership Through Uncertainty model demonstrates how cultures of care, curiosity, and challenge create the conditions for responsible AI adoption. Care ensures that AI decisions center on human dignity and well-being; curiosity supports learning, exploration, and interdisciplinary dialogue; and challenge empowers institutions to confront ethical dilemmas and question technological determinism.

The analysis underscores the need for continuous learning at all levels of educational systems. AI evolves rapidly, and policies or practices effective today may become inadequate or even harmful tomorrow. Adaptive leadership therefore requires mechanisms for ongoing evaluation, community feedback, ethical reflection, and policy revision. This includes monitoring AI systems for bias, assessing their effects on learner outcomes, and ensuring that human oversight remains meaningful. Continuous learning is also essential for educators, who must develop not only technical proficiency but also ethical and pedagogical knowledge to guide learners in navigating complex digital environments.

Taken together, the insights from this article show that AI's transformative potential in education fundamentally depends on how institutions interpret and fulfill their ethical responsibilities. When implemented without reflection, AI can reduce learning to data points, reinforce inequities, and undermine professional and learner autonomy. However, when guided by ethical leadership, inclusive governance, and human-centered values, AI can expand educational opportunities, enhance learner agency, and support more responsive and adaptive learning ecosystems. The critical variable is not the technology itself, but the mindset and culture through which it is integrated.

This synthesis also highlights the deep interconnections between the micro-level dynamics of teaching and learning and the macro-level structures of governance, policy, and global digital economics. AI compels leaders and educators to navigate a complex ethical landscape where decisions about algorithmic systems affect privacy, identity, rights, and social justice. It also prompts us to reconsider the purpose of

education in a world where knowledge is increasingly mediated by intelligent systems. If education is to remain a space for human development, creativity, and democratic participation, AI must be subordinated to pedagogical, ethical, and human-centered priorities. The future of education depends not on how quickly we adopt AI, but on how wisely, thoughtfully, and equitably we integrate it.

The concept of glocalization offers an essential approach for navigating this landscape. By grounding global ethical principles in local cultural contexts, institutions can adopt AI in ways that are both globally aligned and locally relevant. This approach ensures that AI does not become a force for cultural homogenization or digital colonialism, but instead supports educational practices that honor diversity, linguistic plurality, and contextual knowledge. Glocalization also fosters resilience by enabling institutions to adapt global frameworks to evolving local needs.

In conclusion, this discussion emphasizes that leadership in the age of AI is not merely a technical issue but a profoundly human one. Leaders must cultivate dispositions and cultures that support critical reflection, inclusive participation, ethical courage, and adaptive learning. These qualities are essential to ensuring that AI serves as a tool for empowering educators and learners rather than constraining them. The future of education depends on leaders' ability to uphold human-centered values while navigating the opportunities and uncertainties introduced by AI.

Looking ahead, the future of leadership and learning in the age of AI will depend on how effectively institutions balance innovation with human-centered ethics. The rapid evolution of AI requires educational systems to embrace uncertainty not as a threat, but as a condition of contemporary life. The Leadership Through Uncertainty model offers a strong framework for this challenge by integrating cultures of care, curiosity, and challenge. A culture of care ensures that technological decisions are grounded in empathy, equity, and the protection of human dignity. A culture of curiosity encourages experimentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and reflective inquiry, enabling educators and learners to explore AI's potential responsibly. A culture of challenge fosters ethical courage, resilience, and the willingness to confront power imbalances, systemic inequities, and unintended consequences of technological adoption. Together, these cultures guide institutions in creating AI-enabled learning environments that are inclusive, ethical, and sustainable.

In conclusion, leadership in the AI era is fundamentally a moral and philosophical endeavor. AI can support personalized learning pathways, enhance accessibility, and strengthen data-informed decision-making. However, it also has the potential to automate inequality, deepen surveillance, and undermine human autonomy. The direction AI takes in education depends on leaders' ability to anchor technological innovation in human rights, global responsibility, and the public mission of education. AI should not dictate educational futures; instead, human values should govern how AI is designed, implemented, and evaluated.

Ultimately, the future of education requires reimagining learning ecosystems as spaces where humans and machines collaborate to support lifelong learning, democratic participation, and global sustainability. AI can play a constructive role in this transformation only if institutions commit to ethical governance, an inclusive culture, and ongoing critical reflection. The challenge and opportunity is to build learning environments where technology amplifies human potential rather than replaces or diminishes it. The promise of AI will be realized only when leadership ensures that innovation serves humanity.

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