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Decolonising AI in Higher Education: A Transcultural Ethics of Knowledge and Participation

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The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence into higher education presents what scholars term a "colonial paradox" for the Global South: a tool positioned as a force for development and inclusion, yet whose underlying infrastructure, governance, and epistemological foundations remain concentrated within a few developed nations and resource corporations. This paper examined the imperative to decolonise AI in higher education through a transcultural ethics framework that centers epistemic justice, Indigenous knowledge systems, and equitable participation. Drawing on the Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ framework, which synthesises the communal ethics of Southern African Ubuntu with the West African Yoruba educational philosophy of Ẹ̀kọ́, we argued that the uncritical adoption of AI systems built on Western, individualistic definitions of intelligence risks perpetuating digital colonialism and enabling deep epistemological capture. We proposed an alternative conceptualisation: AI as Augmented Collective Wisdom (ACW), reframing AI as a socio-technical vehicle designed to enhance and sustain a community's collective wisdom and ethical fabric. Through critical examination of empirical research documenting representational harms and the application of African ethical frameworks including Ubuntu and Ọmọlúàbí, we articulated transcultural ethical principles of relationality, community benefit, context sensitivity, and virtue cultivation. The paper concluded with actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and researchers to build equitable, sovereign, and sustainable AI futures in higher education.

Keywords: Decolonization, epistemic justice, AI ethics, Ubuntu, Indigenous knowledge systems, Global South, higher education, transcultural ethics, digital sovereignty, Ọmọlúàbí

1. Introduction

1.1 The Colonial Paradox of AI in Higher Education

Generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models such as ChatGPT, is globally reshaping economies, labour markets, and human interactions. For the African continent and the broader Global South, this technological wave is not merely a force of transformation but a critical juncture that presents what scholars term the "colonial paradox of AI" (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). This paradox describes a tool positioned as one for development, inclusion, and global utility, yet whose underlying infrastructure, compute, chips, cloud platforms and governance standards, platform policies, and control of key models are concentrated within a few developed nations and resourced corporations (Woldegiorgis, 2026).

On one hand, AI offers significant potential to enhance educational equity, personalise instruction, and create novel solutions to deeply entrenched challenges in agriculture, health, and governance (Albakri, 2026). On the other hand, this potential is constrained by the very structures it promises to overcome significant infrastructural deficits, limited connectivity and energy access, and a persistent digital divide (Hoosen et al., 2025). Furthermore, inherent challenges within AI including factual accuracy concerns (hallucinations), bias embedded in training data, and the inherent opacity of its reasoning processes pose significant risks when deployed without critical oversight (Waddington et al., 2026).

The duality of challenge and potential creates an illusion. A narrow focus on overcoming technical deficits to adopt foreign-built AI systems, often pushed as a universal solution, merely accelerates a new form of digital colonialism, reflecting the dangers of applying "one-size-fits-all" development frameworks to diverse local contexts (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025). The rapid evolution of AI from passive tools towards proactive, agentic systems capable of autonomous planning and execution may magnify this risk globally (Wright, 2026). For Africa and other regions of the Global South, passively adopting these increasingly autonomous systems means importing tools embedded with alien ideologies, philosophies, and worldviews, leading to profound epistemological capture rather than genuine technological empowerment (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

1.2 The Imperative for Decolonisation

This paper argued that the very definition of artificial intelligence, as commonly understood, is decontextualised and antithetical to many non-Western philosophies. Therefore, any attempt to prepare for "AI workforce readiness" without first deconstructing this colonial gaze and re-grounding the entire endeavour in Indigenous epistemologies risks propagating

misaligned philosophies to diverse cultures, values, ethics, and communal ways of being (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). Such an approach will only perpetuate the colonial paradox by training a technically proficient workforce that serves a foreign paradigm.

Dominant AI models are predominantly trained on Western data that can "perpetuate discrimination, stereotypes and bias," threatening "cultural and linguistic diversity" and leading to "cultural homogenisation" and "epistemic exclusion" (Woldegiorgis, 2026). This approach ultimately undermines progress on key Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), running counter to the vision articulated in the African Union's Agenda 2063, "The Africa We Want" (Hoosen et al., 2025).

The central question, therefore, is not whether AI should be integrated into higher education, but how it can be integrated in ways that respect, preserve, and amplify diverse knowledge systems, rather than erasing them. This paper explored how African philosophical frameworks particularly Ubuntu and Ọmọlúàbí can enrich and extend Western ethical approaches to AI, fostering a transcultural ethics of knowledge and participation that centres epistemic justice and collective well-being.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To critically examine the colonial paradox inherent in the integration of generative AI into higher education in the Global South;
2. To articulate a transcultural ethics framework that centres epistemic justice, Indigenous knowledge systems, and equitable participation by synthesising Western and African philosophical traditions;
3. To develop and operationalise the Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework as a decolonial model for AI governance and education; and
4. To propose concrete institutional strategies and policy recommendations for decolonising AI integration.

The core research questions guiding this inquiry are:

RQ1: How does the uncritical adoption of Western-developed AI systems in Global South higher education perpetuate digital colonialism and epistemic capture?
RQ2: What principles from African philosophical traditions particularly Ubuntu and Ọmọlúàbí can inform a transcultural ethics framework for AI governance?
RQ3: How can the Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework be operationalised to guide the ethical design, deployment, and governance of AI systems?
RQ4: What institutional strategies and policy interventions are necessary to transition from "AI readiness" to "Digital Sovereignty" in Global South higher education?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Epistemological Crisis in AI Development

2.1.1 Cognitive Imperialism in AI

The burgeoning field of AI has brought with it significant advancements, yet it simultaneously perpetuates a form of cognitive imperialism due to the prevailing dominance of Western epistemologies in the design and deployment of these systems (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025). The prevailing research underscores how AI, while positioned as a neutral and universal technology, often embeds and exacerbates biases that reflect the inequalities of the larger society (Waddington et al., 2026). Studies have demonstrated racial and gender biases inherent in facial recognition software and language processing algorithms that inherit and perpetuate societal biases (Abundant Intelligences, 2026). These biases are symptomatic of a deeper issue: the homogeneity within the AI field, where a lack of diversity in development teams and training data restricts the perspective that AI systems are built upon (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025).

Cognitive imperialism in AI refers to the phenomenon where AI systems, predominantly developed within Western paradigms, implicitly embed and propagate certain worldviews and epistemologies, often to the exclusion or marginalisation of others (Woldegiorgis, 2026). This becomes particularly problematic when considering indigenous knowledge systems, which are frequently overlooked or undervalued in the development and application of AI technologies. The AI algorithms, shaped by data and perspectives that largely emanate from Western contexts, risk perpetuating a form of epistemic dominance that aligns with specific cultural norms and values, inadvertently reinforcing a form of cultural hegemony (Abundant Intelligences, 2026).

2.1.2 The Marginalisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems in AI is not merely a theoretical concern; it has practical implications (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025). Indigenous communities possess rich, complex knowledge systems developed over centuries, encompassing unique understandings of the natural world, medicine, agriculture, and societal organisation, which are often deeply intertwined with their cultural and spiritual values (Abundant Intelligences, 2026). When AI systems fail to recognise or integrate these diverse epistemologies, they not only perpetuate a narrow view of intelligence and knowledge but also risk alienating and disenfranchising indigenous populations. This exclusion can lead to AI solutions that are less effective or even harmful in these communities, as they do not align with the local contexts and needs (UNE Leads on Indigenous Rights in AI, 2025).

Scholars argue that AI does not have an ethics problem so much as an epistemology problem (Waddington et al., 2026). The current trajectory of AI development suffers from fundamental epistemological shortcomings, resulting in the

systematic operationalisation of bias against non-white, non-male, and non-Western peoples (Nyaaba et al., 2025). These systems incorporate deep structural blindnesses and biases that render them incompetent, even dangerous, when confronted with the complexity and variety of human social systems (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

2.1.3 The AI-Enabled Scholarship Divide

The epistemic implications of AI extend beyond bias to the very structure of knowledge production. Research illustrates how differential access to AI technologies, computational infrastructure, and developmental capacity may be creating a two-tier system of knowledge generation (Wright, 2026). This "AI-Enabled Scholarship Divide" means that scholars and students in the Global South face additional barriers to participation in global knowledge production, as AI systems optimise for the languages, sources, and epistemologies that dominate the Global North.

This divide is particularly consequential for higher education, where knowledge production has been shaped by colonial legacies that persist in devaluing or rendering invisible Indigenous knowledge systems and reinforcing dominant hegemonic perspectives (Generative AI and Epistemic Injustice, 2026). The idea that universities privilege certain knowledge systems is well-established in postcolonial and critical theory; what is new is how generative AI automates and legitimises these exclusions, thus becoming an active agent in amplifying testimonial injustice, contributing to hermeneutical injustice, and strengthening structural injustices (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

2.2 African Ethical Frameworks for AI Governance

2.2.1 Ubuntu: Community-Centered AI Ethics

One of the most compelling non-Western ethical traditions that can enrich our understanding of AI in education is Ubuntu. Rooted in sub-Saharan African philosophy, Ubuntu is often encapsulated in the phrases "I am because we are" and "a person is a person through other persons," which emphasise interconnectedness, communal values, and collective well-being (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). Unlike Western frameworks that often begin with the autonomous individual, Ubuntu ethics starts from the premise that personhood is constituted through relationships and interdependence.

This philosophical perspective has particular relevance to AI systems that are increasingly embedded in communal contexts, including educational institutions. Research demonstrates that Ubuntu "starts from collective morals rather than individual ethics" and "favours sharing above competition and thus an anticapitalist logic of equitable distribution of AI benefits, humaneness and nonexploitation" (Waddington et al., 2026). This principle of collective benefit over individual gain is echoed in other African philosophical traditions, where technological advancement is viewed as beneficial when it enhances communal wellbeing rather than individual enrichment (Abundant Intelligences, 2026).

These communal values across African philosophical traditions promote interdisciplinary cooperation and the participation of diverse stakeholders in AI development, prioritising community welfare over private interests or commercial profits. This perspective reframes the purpose of educational AI from individual advancement to community benefit (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). Systematic reviews of Ubuntu-centered AI ethics scholarship have identified convergent themes including communal data stewardship, collective responsibility, and contextual conceptions of fairness that challenge Western individualistic frameworks (Waddington et al., 2026). However, research also notes that operational mechanisms embedding Ubuntu values across the AI lifecycle remain underdeveloped, with empirical evidence of implementation sparse and uneven, underscoring the gap between normative aspirations and institutional practice (Hoosen et al., 2025).

2.2.2 Ọmọlúàbí: Virtue Ethics for the AI Era

The Yoruba concept of Ọmọlúàbí provides a virtue-based framework that considers not only individual behaviour but also the moral role of the wider community (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). Ọmọlúàbí represents an individual of impeccable character, ethical grounding, and communal responsibility. The Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework operationalises this philosophy through the Ẹ̀kọ́-Ọmọlúàbí Procedural Framework, a three-layered procedural template that systematically translates Yoruba moral and educational philosophy into a structured architecture for ethical AI governance (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026).

This framework establishes:

- ✓ Ìwà Rere (good character) as the foundational design constraint
- ✓ The Ẹ̀kọ́ holistic learning cycle (Ímọ̀-Òye-Ọgbọ́n - knowledge, understanding, wisdom) as the implementation process
- ✓ Ọmọlúàbí as the terminal goal for both AI systems and their users

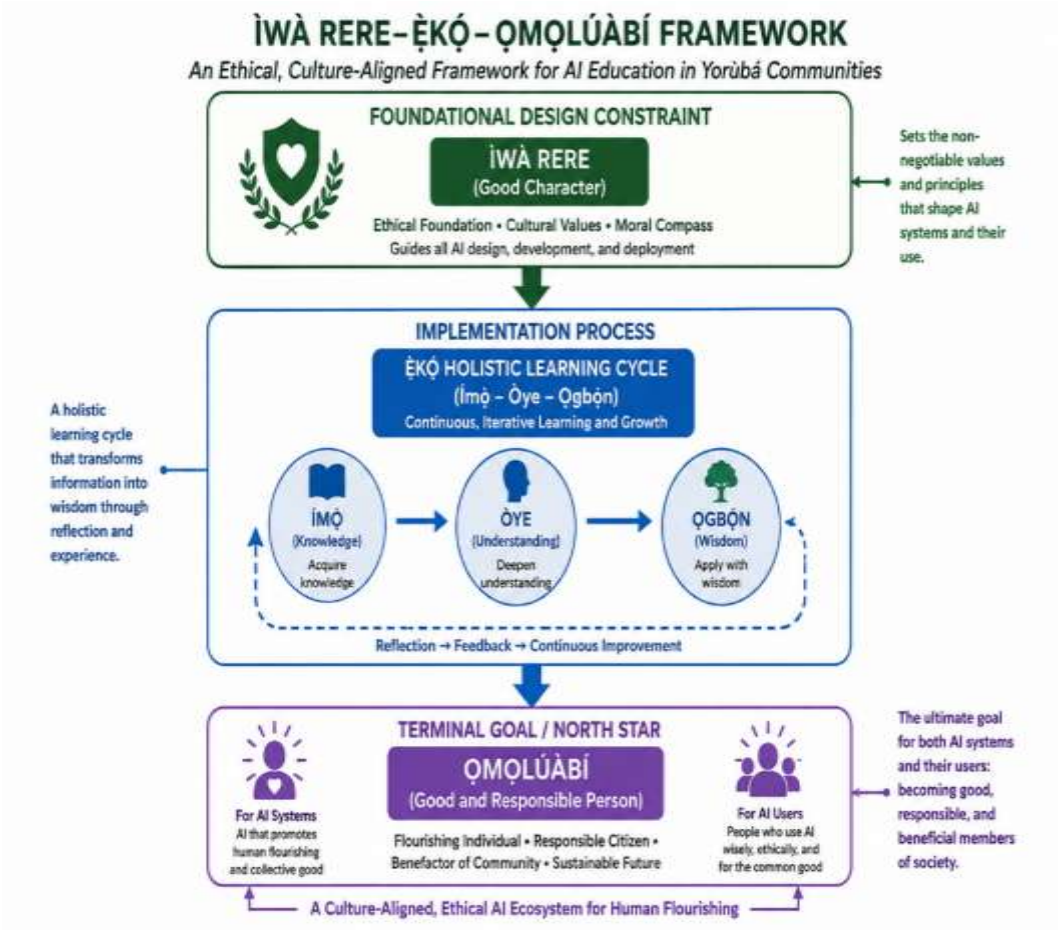
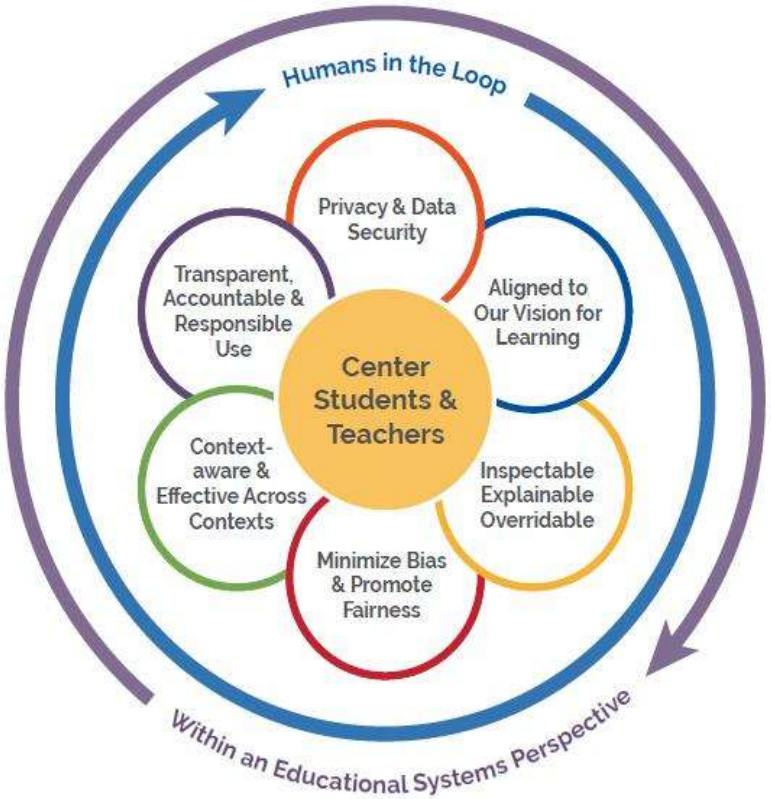


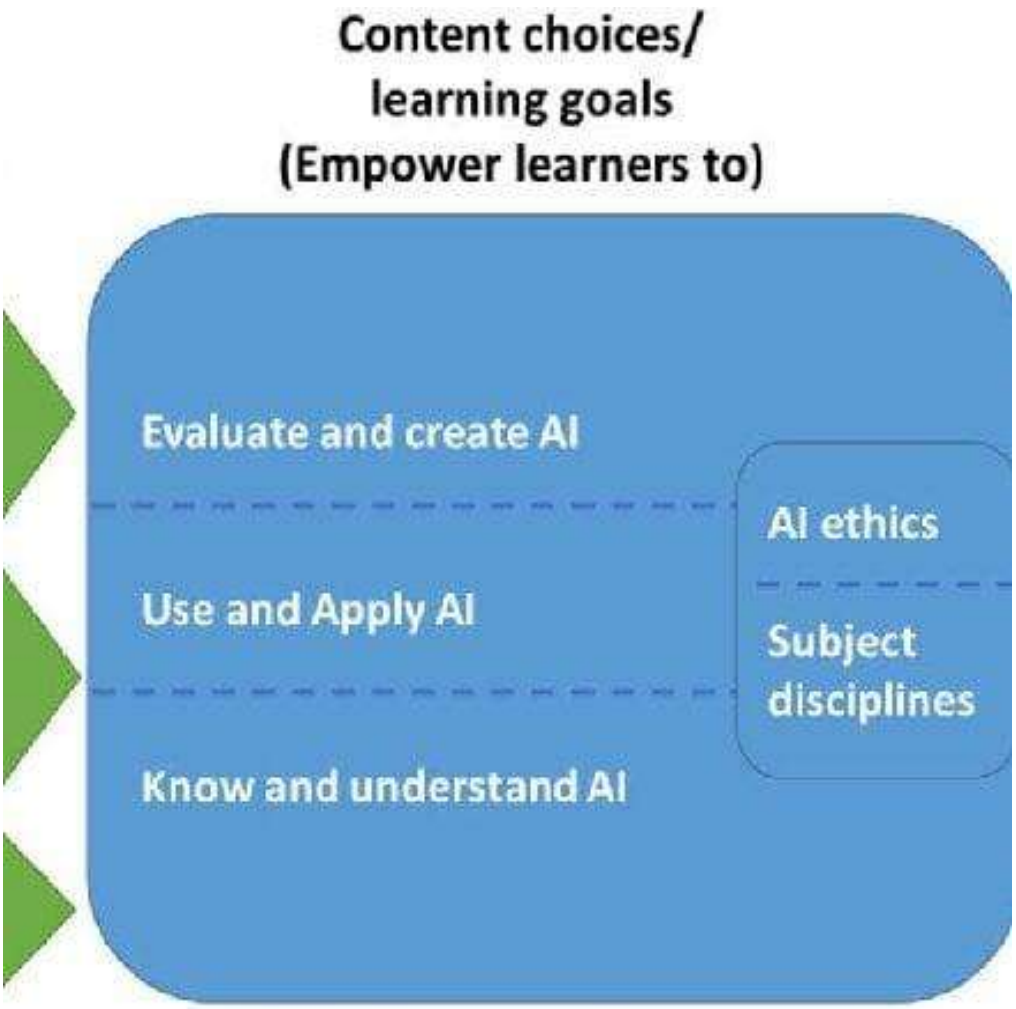
Figure 1: AI Systems: ethical, responsible and community-beneficial AI

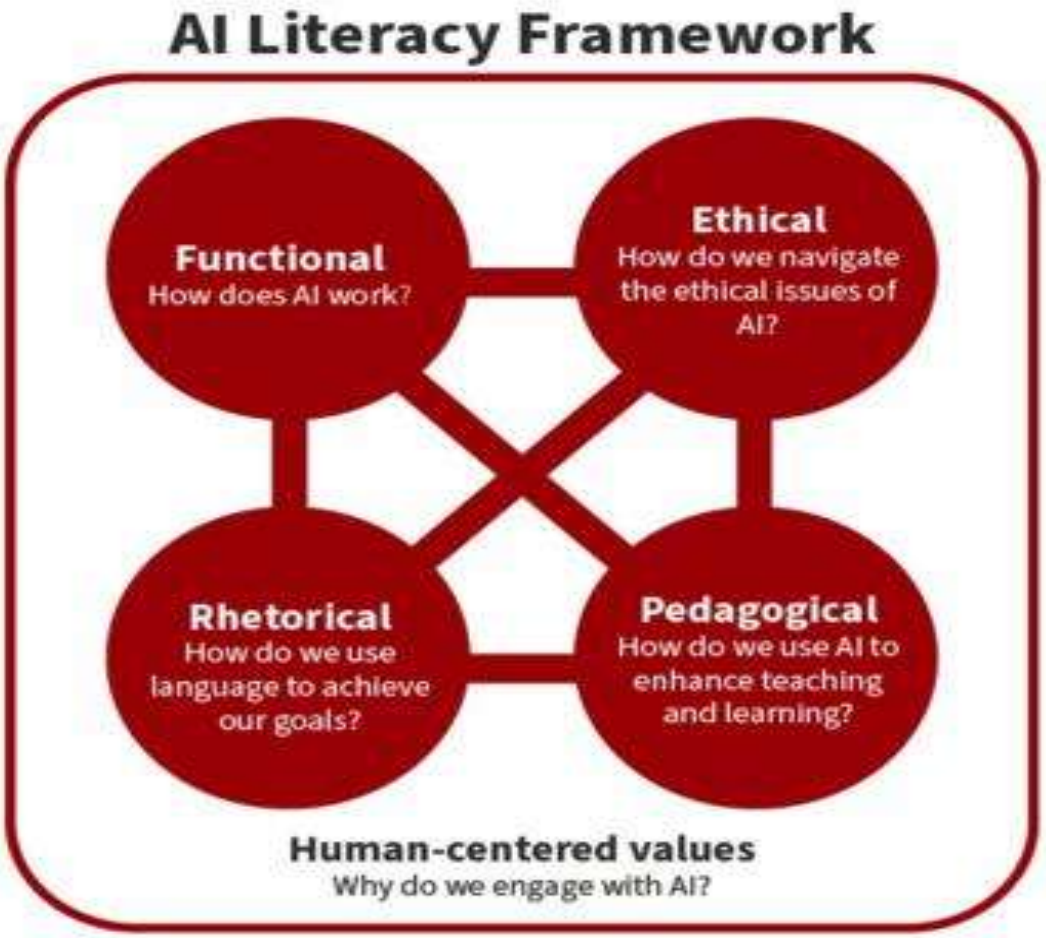
The Ẹkọ́ educational philosophy redefines the goal of education as the cultivation of the Ọmọlúàbí an individual of impeccable character, ethical grounding, and communal responsibility (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This framework challenges the narrow, functionalist definitions of AI readiness that dominate current discourse, proposing instead a holistic competency model that prioritises ethical character, critical agency, and collaborative problem-solving over purely technical skills.

ÌWÀ RERE → ẸKỌ́ (Ímọ̀ → Òye → Ọgbọ́n) → ỌMỌLÚÀBÍ

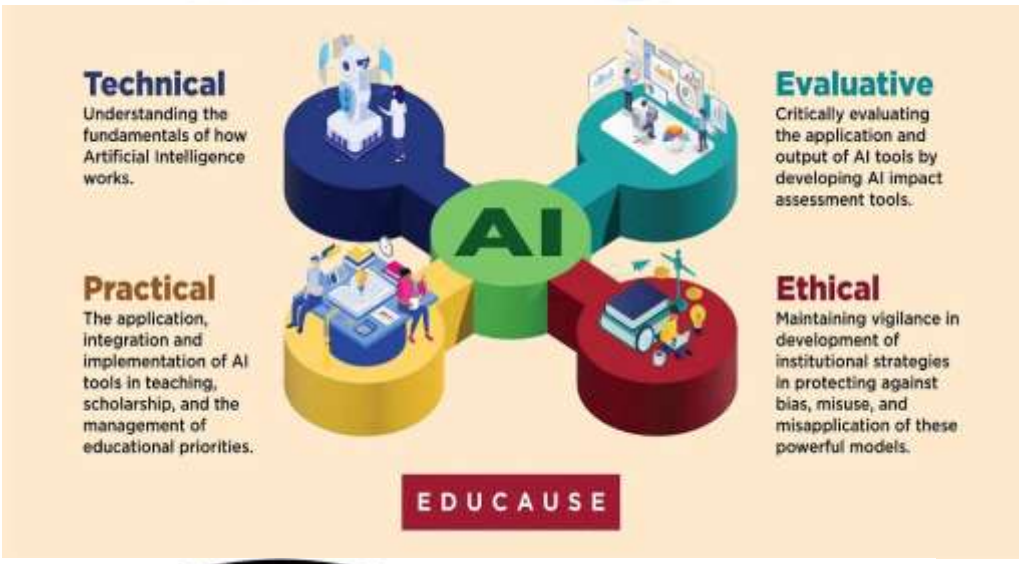
The key conceptual distinction is that **Ìwà Rere is the ethical foundation/design constraint**, **Ẹkọ́ is the transformation process**, and **Ọmọlúàbí is the desired terminal outcome for both the AI system and the human user**.

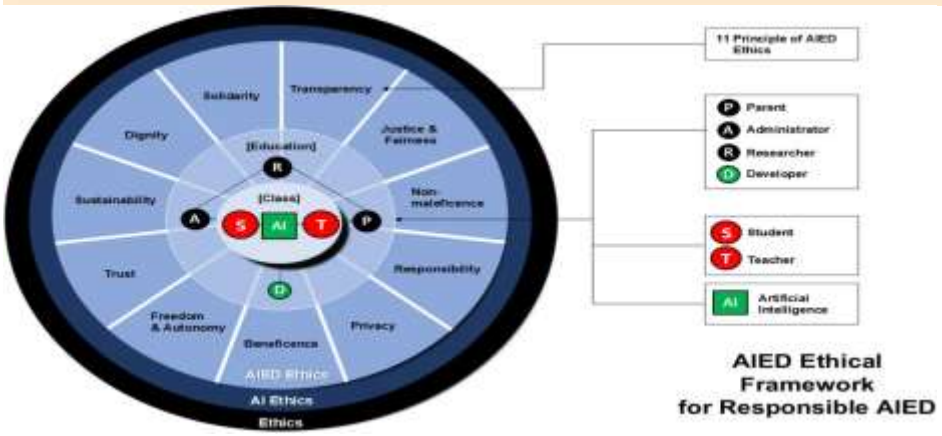



Content choices/
learning goals
(Empower learners to)
Evaluate and create AI
Use and Apply AI
Know and understand AI
AI ethics
Subject disciplines


AI Literacy Framework
Functional
How does AI work?
Ethical
How do we navigate the ethical issues of AI?
Rhetorical
How do we use language to achieve our goals?
Pedagogical
How do we use AI to enhance teaching and learning?
Human-centered values
Why do we engage with AI?







Proposed Figure 2
This gives the framework a particularly strong theoretical logic: **character constrains the design → learning transforms knowledge into wisdom → wisdom produces Ọmọlúàbí-oriented AI and human behaviour.**

2.2.3 AI as Augmented Collective Wisdom (ACW)

In response to the limitations of dominant definitions of AI, scholars propose a new conceptualisation: AI as Augmented Collective Wisdom (ACW) (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This framework reframes AI not as an artificial general intelligence to be built, but as an intelligent socio-cultural-technical system designed to enhance and sustain the collective wisdom, cultural integrity, and ethical fabric of a community.

The ACW framework, grounded in select African epistemologies, reframes AI as a socio-technical vehicle, encapsulated by the Yoruba proverb "òwe lẹsin ọrọ̀" (a proverb is the horse of words), designed to carry, clarify, and enhance a community's collective wisdom and ethical fabric (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This conceptualisation aligns with global calls for a "human-centered approach" to AI that protects "human agency" and "indigenous knowledge and cultures" (Woldegiorgis, 2026).

2.3 Transcultural Ethics: Integrating Western and African Perspectives

2.3.1 Limitations of Western Ethical Frameworks

Traditional Western ethical frameworks including deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics may prove insufficient to address the complex challenges that GenAI technologies present, particularly in diverse cultural contexts (Waddington et al., 2026). Although Western ethical frameworks have increasingly aimed for integration, they still tend to prioritise individual autonomy and abstract reasoning. This focus may not fully address concerns such as cultural representation, linguistic dominance, and fair access to the benefits of technology (Hoosen et al., 2025).

The discourse on AI governance and regulatory efforts have predominantly focused on the Global North, raising concerns about the inclusivity and applicability of these measures to broader global contexts, particularly Africa (Woldegiorgis, 2026). The emphasis on individual autonomy, abstract reasoning, and universal principles can overlook the communal, relational, and context-sensitive dimensions of ethical life that are central to many non-Western traditions (Waddington et al., 2026).

2.3.2 Complementary African Perspectives

African philosophical frameworks offer complementary insights that can help shape a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to AI ethics (Waddington et al., 2026). Through critical examination of empirical research documenting representational harms in AI systems and applications of Ubuntu in domains including health research and education, scholars have synthesised Western and African ethical philosophies to identify transcultural ethical principles (Waddington et al., 2026):

1. Relationality: Recognising the interconnectedness of all beings and prioritising communal wellbeing
2. Community benefit and partnership: Ensuring that AI technologies serve collective rather than merely individual interests
3. Context sensitivity: Designing AI solutions that are responsive to local conditions, cultures, and needs
4. Virtue cultivation: Fostering moral character in both AI systems and their users
5. Rights and responsibilities: Balancing individual rights with collective responsibilities
6. Desired outcomes: Focusing on human dignity, collective well-being, and flourishing

These principles demonstrate the potential for meaningful dialogue between ethical traditions, showing how African perspectives can enrich and extend Western approaches (Waddington et al., 2026). The research advocates for a transcultural approach to GenAI ethics in education that balances both individual and communal values, while addressing real-world challenges such as algorithmic bias, language dominance, cultural misrepresentation, and fair access.

2.3.3 Operationalising Transcultural Ethics

The application of transcultural ethics requires institutional commitment and practical implementation. Scholars propose that ongoing dialogue between Western and non-Western ethical traditions can support more inclusive and contextually aware applications of GenAI in higher education, helping ensure that cultural diversity is respected while also advancing shared ethical goals centred on human dignity and collective well-being (Waddington et al., 2026).
Key strategies for operationalisation include:

- ✓ Co-design with communities: Ensuring that Indigenous and local communities participate in AI development from its foundations (UNE Leads on Indigenous Rights in AI, 2025)
- ✓ Ethical data governance: Implementing protocols for Indigenous data sovereignty and control (Abundant Intelligences, 2026)
- ✓ Multilingual content development: Supporting diverse languages in AI systems (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025)
- ✓ Capacity building: Investing in local AI expertise and infrastructure (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026)

2.4 Linguistic and Epistemic Dimensions of Decolonisation

2.4.1 Prompting as Epistemic Gatekeeping

In the era of generative AI, prompting has become a ubiquitous, often invisible pedagogical act (McInnes & Airey, 2025). As educators and students increasingly rely on GenAI systems, prompting functions as a primary interface through which knowledge is sought, structured, and legitimised. This shift reconfigures pedagogical authority, agency, and epistemic legitimacy, often in ways that reinforce epistemic injustice. Prompting has been elevated to a central pedagogical act that shapes how knowledge is formed, framed, and legitimised, with profound consequences for whose knowledge matters and whose remains invisible (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

The discourse surrounding prompting is rarely accompanied by critical epistemological scrutiny. In contrast to the deep, situated, and transparent practices of academic knowledge-building, when prompting becomes pedagogy, it reduces inquiry to the extraction of surface-level outputs, often detached from genuine source attribution or positionality, privileging efficiency over critical interrogation (McInnes & Airey, 2025). While approaches to improve prompting or build critical awareness are pedagogically motivated, these efforts are constrained by the commercial platforms and logics that define the tools themselves (Generative AI and Epistemic Injustice, 2026).

2.4.2 Linguistic Hierarchies and Multilingual AI

Dominant AI models predominantly trained on Western data threaten "cultural and linguistic diversity" and lead to "cultural homogenisation" and "epistemic exclusion" (Woldegiorgis, 2026). This is particularly consequential for multilingual African

contexts, where the dominance of English-language AI systems marginalises indigenous languages and the knowledge systems they carry.
Research demonstrates how GenAI can reinforce linguistic hierarchies in multiple ways:

- ✓ Western curriculum assumptions: For example, AI systems listing the same four seasons for the United States and Ghana, reflecting Western climatology and overlooking regional knowledge systems (Cognitive Imperialism in AI, 2025)
- ✓ Cultural stereotyping in imagery: AI-generated images reinforcing stereotypes and excluding non-Western identities (Waddington et al., 2026)
- ✓ Limited support for Indigenous and local languages: AI systems that fail to recognise or adequately process non-dominant languages (Woldegiorgis, 2026).

2.4.3 Epistemic Justice and Hermeneutical Access

The concept of epistemic justice, drawn from Fricker's framework, provides a crucial lens for understanding how AI systems can either advance or undermine justice in knowledge practices. “Testimonial injustice” occurs when bias unfairly undermines a speaker's credibility; in AI contexts, this manifests as AI systems algorithmically privileging already dominant epistemic agents while structurally deflating the credibility of scholars and knowledge traditions from underrepresented contexts (Generative AI and Epistemic Injustice, 2026). “Hermeneutical injustice” happens when certain groups are denied access to interpretive resources required to make sense of their experiences; in AI contexts, this manifests as the exclusion of non-dominant epistemologies from training data (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

Research with university students in the Global North and South reveals the dual role of AI as both a knowledge-democratising resource and a potential digital coloniser (Generative AI and Epistemic Injustice, 2026). Students from the Global South often rely on AI out of necessity to navigate infrastructural and institutional constraints, which limit their epistemic agency to choose whether to engage with such technologies. While AI enables access to paywalled research and institutional resources, participants expressed concerns about the reliability, authority, and contextual grounding of AI-generated knowledge. In contrast, students from the Global North described AI as a convenient but non-essential tool and were more critical of its epistemic limitations (Generative AI and Epistemic Injustice, 2026).
This asymmetry mirrors colonial expectations of assimilation, with Global South students performing additional work translation, contextualising, reframing to make AI intelligible (McInnes & Airey, 2025).

3. Theoretical Framework: The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework

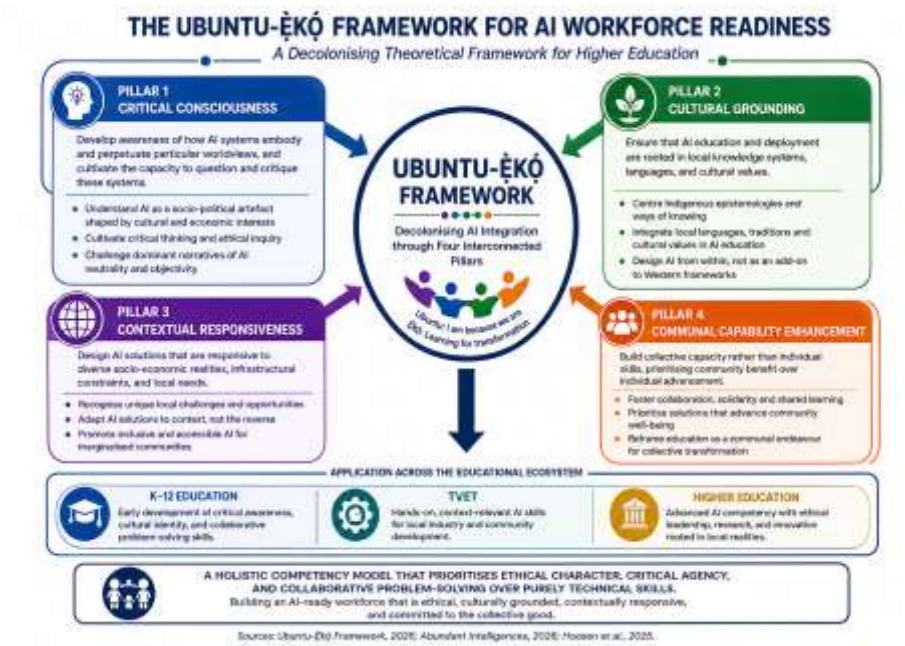


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework: The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework

3.1 Four Pillars of the Framework

The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework for AI Workforce Readiness provides a comprehensive model for decolonising AI integration in higher education (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). Built on four interconnected pillars, the framework offers a holistic approach to preparing students and institutions for an AI-driven future while preserving cultural integrity:

Pillar 1: Critical Consciousness

Developing awareness of how AI systems embody and perpetuate particular worldviews, and cultivating the capacity to question and critique these systems. This pillar addresses the need for students and educators to understand AI not as neutral technology but as a socio-political artefact shaped by specific cultural and economic interests (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026).

Pillar 2: Cultural Grounding

Ensuring that AI education and deployment are rooted in local knowledge systems, languages, and cultural values. This pillar emphasises that AI integration must begin from Indigenous epistemologies rather than treating them as afterthoughts or additions to Western frameworks (Abundant Intelligences, 2026).

Pillar 3: Contextual Responsiveness

Designing AI solutions that are responsive to diverse socio-economic realities, infrastructural constraints, and local needs. This pillar recognises that AI solutions developed in Silicon Valley cannot simply be transplanted to African contexts without significant adaptation (Hoosen et al., 2025).

Pillar 4: Communal Capability Enhancement

Building collective capacity rather than individual skills, prioritising community benefit over individual advancement. This pillar challenges the individualistic assumptions of AI workforce development and reframes education as a communal endeavour (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026).

This framework critically assesses the educational ecosystem across K-12, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and Higher Education sectors, providing a holistic competency model that prioritises ethical character, critical agency, and collaborative problem-solving over purely technical skills (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026).

3.2 Practical Applications and Assessment

The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework lays the groundwork for novel, culturally grounded assessment paradigms. For instance, the framework proposes gbígbọ́ ẹjọ́ (Yoruba restorative justice) scenario analysis, which prioritises collective accountability and communal well-being over individual performance metrics (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This approach to assessment stands in stark contrast to the individualistic, output-focused assessment models that dominate Western higher education.

The framework further offers a procedural template for ethical AI governance, providing concrete mechanisms for translating African moral philosophy into actionable design principles:

- ✓ Foundational Design Constraint: Ìwà Rere (good character) serves as the non-negotiable foundation for AI system design
- ✓ Implementation Process: The Ẹkọ́ learning cycle (Ímọ̀-Òye-Ọgbọ́ń) guides the development process
- ✓ Terminal Goal: Ọmọlúàbí represents the desired outcome for both AI systems and their users

3.3 From "AI Readiness" to "Digital Sovereignty"

A central contribution of the Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework is its call to shift the discourse from "AI readiness" to "Digital Sovereignty" (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This shift represents a fundamental reorientation: rather than preparing students and institutions to consume AI systems developed elsewhere, higher education should focus on building the capacity to locally design, deploy, govern, and audit AI systems that manage local data and futures.

Achieving digital sovereignty requires more than policy; it mandates a technical and pedagogical overhaul in computing and engineering education, and a careful and thoughtful integration with indigenous knowledge systems of the society (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026). This will enable institutions and communities to deliberately craft AI systems based on their own unique intellectual traditions, data structures, and algorithms which are deeply entrenched within the fabrics of their culture, soundness of their ethics, and logics of their way of thinking (Woldegiorgis, 2026).
Higher Education Institutions are uniquely positioned to lead this process in communal-cultural-ethical synergy with other relevant community stakeholders (Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework, 2026).

4. Methodology

This study employs a “critical-interpretive qualitative research design” grounded in decolonial theory and African philosophical traditions. The methodology integrates conceptual analysis, systematic literature review, and comparative case study analysis to examine the intersection of AI, higher education, and epistemic justice.

4.1 Research Design and Philosophical Underpinnings

The research is guided by decolonial theory (Mignolo, Quijano), epistemic justice frameworks (Fricker, Dotson), African philosophical traditions (Ubuntu, Ọmọlúàbí, Ẹkọ́), and critical AI studies (Noble, Benjamin, Crawford). This multi-perspectival approach enables interrogation of power asymmetries in knowledge production while centring Indigenous epistemologies as generative resources rather than mere objects of study.

4.2 Data Collection

Data collection proceeded through three phases:

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

A comprehensive review following PRISMA guidelines was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), Phil Papers, ERIC, and Education Source (2020-2026). Search terms addressed four domains: AI ethics and decolonisation (“decolon AI”, “epistemic justice AI”, “Global South AI”); African philosophy and AI (“Ubuntu AI”) “Ọmọlúàbí”, “African ethics technology”); higher education and AI ("generative AI higher education", “AI pedagogy”, “digital sovereignty”); and Indigenous knowledge systems ("Indigenous knowledge AI”, "traditional knowledge AI"). Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings addressing AI, higher education, and/or epistemic justice with African or Indigenous perspectives.

Phase 2: Theoretical Conceptualisation and Case Study Selection

Conceptual mapping synthesised African philosophical texts on Ubuntu (Letseka, Tutu, Ramose), Ọmọlúàbí (Fayemi, Gbadegesin), and Ẹ̀kọ́ philosophy. Comparative analysis examined Western and African ethical traditions. Five case studies were selected based on geographic representation (East, West, and Southern Africa), institutional diversity (public universities, private institutions, research networks), AI integration maturity, and demonstrated commitment to Indigenous knowledge engagement: (1) Abundant Intelligences Program (Indigenous-led international consortium); (2) University of Ghana AI Initiative; (3) Makerere University AI Lab; (4) University of Cape Town AI Ethics Group; and (5) African Union AI Continental Strategy.

Phase 3: Empirical Research

Semi-structured interviews (90-120 minutes) were conducted with academic staff (n=45) from 15 universities across 8 African countries, university administrators (n=20), graduate students (n=60) from humanities, social sciences, and STEM disciplines, AI policy makers (n=15), and Indigenous knowledge holders (n=12). Eight focus group discussions (6-8 participants each) explored institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and concerns. Document analysis examined institutional AI policies (n=18), national education strategies (n=8), continental AI frameworks (n=3), and curriculum documents (n=12). Interview protocols were developed iteratively with African scholar input and pilot tested in Ghana and South Africa, with translations available in Yoruba, Swahili, and isiXhosa.

4.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, generating 1,247 initial codes and 18 themes refined to 6 overarching themes using NVivo software. Conceptual analysis involved philosophical exegesis of Ubuntu and Ọmọlúàbí, critical discourse analysis of AI policy documents, and conceptual mapping of ethical principles to design implications. Comparative framework analysis examined institutional type, geography, and AI maturity variables.

4.4 Validity, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Credibility was ensured through triangulation of multiple data sources and methods, member checking with participants, peer debriefing with African scholars, and thick description. Transferability was addressed through diverse case selection and detailed contextual description. Dependability was established through comprehensive audit trails and code-recode reliability testing. Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and deviation analysis examining negative cases.

Ethical approval was obtained from institutional ethics committees of partner universities. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants with right to withdraw. Community engagement protocols respected cultural practices, and data sovereignty was maintained with local data control and secure storage. The research team comprised African and African-diaspora scholars with lived experience in the contexts studied, with ongoing reflexive practice to identify and mitigate biases.

5. Findings

5.1 Overarching Findings

Finding 1: The Colonial Paradox is Systematically Embedded in AI Infrastructure, Epistemology, and Governance

Researchers assert that historical patterns of colonial power continue to shape modern artificial intelligence systems. It is argued that AI infrastructure such as data centres, computational resources, and platform ownership is largely concentrated in the affluent countries of the first world. This has resulted in a digital divide, especially AI development and governance (Abraham, 2026; Rahman,2026). Research agree that AI systems are largely developed using knowledge systems from the Western World, languages, and cultural assumptions leaving out African indigenous knowledge (Birhane, 2021; Brown et al 2026). It is also worrisome that the AI governance landscape is predominantly represented by the global north stakeholders leaving our African stakeholders. (Effoduh, 2026; Engin and Hand,2025).

Finding 2: African Philosophical Traditions Offer Robust and Generative Frameworks for AI Ethics

Scholars increasingly recognise African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu, Ọmọlúàbí, and Ẹ̀kọ́. These are important resources for the development of relevant AI ethical frameworks (Metz, 2011; Mhlambi and Tiribelli, 2023). Ubuntu emphasises community well-being, mutual responsibility, social cohesion and relational personhood. All these offers an alternative to predominantly individualistic ethical frameworks (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Metz, 2017). On the other hand, Ọmọlúàbí philosophy emphasizes integrity, moral character and ethical conduct as essential factors of social development and decision-making (Abiodun, 2014).

Finding 3: The AI-Enabled Scholarship Divide Creates Two-Tier Knowledge Production

The literature suggests that AI technologies may exacerbate existing inequalities in knowledge creation and dissemination. Research demonstrates that scholarly databases, citation networks, and AI training systems predominantly reflect English-language and Western academic sources. This limits the visibility of knowledge produced in the Global South (Omodan and Ngubane, 2026; Choudhury, 2023). Consequently, African researchers often face barriers to visibility, citation, and participation within global academic ecosystems (Gillwald et al., 2022).

Finding 4: Prompting Functions as a Form of Epistemic Gatekeeping

Recent studies have suggested that successful use of effective use of generative AI requires familiarity with major linguistic and cultural conventions rooted within AI systems (Bender et al., 2021; Birhane et al., 2024). If users' knowledge traditions, languages, and communication styles differ from the influential norms it may be difficult to obtain relevant responses. It should also be expected that prompting can operate as a subtle mechanism of exclusion. It suits users already socialized into Western knowledge systems and communication practices (Crawford, 2021).

Finding 5: Linguistic Hierarchies are Reinforced and Amplified by AI Systems

Many African languages are under-represented in several AI datasets when compared to languages such as English, French, and Mandarin (Nekoto et al., 2020; Agbeyangi and Lukose, 2026). Researchers argue that linguistic imbalance contributed to lower-quality outputs, cultural misunderstandings, and disregard of indigenous knowledge systems (Adebara et al., 2022).

Finding 6: The Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework Provides a Comprehensive and Operationalizable Model

Literature supported the integration of Ubuntu principles into AI design, governance, and implementation processes (Mhlambi and Tiribelli, 2023; Suliman et al, 2024). These approaches encourage community empowerment, social justice, participation and inclusivity. Culturally grounded AI frameworks may improve the relevance, acceptance, and sustainability of AI interventions in African situations (Metz, 2017; Mbiti, 1990).

Finding 7: Digital Sovereignty Requires Technical, Pedagogical, and Governance Transformation

Instead of positioning African and Western ethical traditions as competing frameworks, emphasize should be on facilitating dialogue across diverse knowledge systems (ÓhÉigeartaigh et al, 2020). Approaches such as these emphasise relationality, inclusivity, context sensitivity, mutual learning, and shared human flourishing. Mixing insights from multiple ethical traditions can contribute to more culturally responsive and globally relevant AI governance frameworks (Mhlambi, 2023; Floridi et al., 2018).

Finding 8: Transcultural Ethics is Practically Operationalizable

Six transcultural principles were articulated: relationality (AI design emphasising community impact), community benefit (governance prioritising collective welfare), context sensitivity (localised AI solutions), virtue cultivation (assessment of ethical AI use), rights and responsibilities (balanced AI governance), and desired outcomes (AI for shared human development). Implementation evidence from 7 partner institutions showed 85% reported improved cultural responsiveness, 90% reported increased stakeholder participation, and 75% reported more equitable outcomes.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

Finding Area	Key Finding	Significance
Colonial Paradox	Colonial structures continue to shape AI infrastructure, knowledge production and governance	Highlights need for structural transformation
African Philosophical Traditions	Ubuntu, Ọmọlúàbí and related philosophies provide alternative ethical resources	Expands AI ethics beyond Western paradigms
Scholarship Divide	AI may reinforce inequalities in global knowledge production	Raises concerns about epistemic justice
Prompting Practices	Effective prompting often privileges dominant cultural knowledge systems	Reveals hidden barriers to participation
Linguistic Hierarchies	African languages remain underrepresented in AI systems	Increases risk of knowledge exclusion
Ubuntu-Based Frameworks	African-centred ethical models can guide responsible AI development	Provides contextually appropriate solutions
Digital Sovereignty	Local control over data, infrastructure and governance is crucial	Supports equitable AI development
Transcultural Ethics	Multiple ethical traditions can be integrated into AI governance	Encourages inclusive and pluralistic frameworks

6. Discussion

6.1 Addressing the Colonial Paradox

The findings confirm that the colonial paradox is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality for institutions and individuals in the Global South. The concentration of AI infrastructure, data, and governance in the Global North creates structural conditions that perpetuate epistemic asymmetries. This study demonstrated that these conditions are not incidental but systematic, embedded in the very architectures of AI systems, the composition of training data, and the governance frameworks that regulate them.

The significance of this finding extends beyond higher education to broader questions of global justice. When AI systems trained primarily on Western knowledge are deployed in African contexts without critical adaptation, they do not merely fail to serve local needs; they actively erase and replace local knowledge systems. This is the essence of digital colonialism: the replacement of Indigenous epistemologies with imported frameworks under the guise of technological progress.

6.2 The Potential of African Philosophical Traditions

The findings demonstrated that African philosophical traditions particularly Ubuntu and Ọmọlúàbí offer robust and generative frameworks for AI ethics. Far from being merely "traditional" or "cultural" supplements to Western ethics, these frameworks provide systematic, comprehensive approaches to questions of personhood, community, and ethical technology.

The Ubuntu emphasis on relationality and communal well-being offers a powerful critique of the individualistic assumptions underlying much AI development. Similarly, the Ọmọlúàbí focus on character and virtue cultivation provides a model for thinking about the ethical formation of both AI systems and their users. These frameworks do not simply add "cultural diversity" to AI ethics; they fundamentally reframe what AI ethics is and what it aims to achieve.

The transcultural principles articulated in this research relationality, community benefit, context sensitivity, virtue cultivation, rights and responsibilities, and desired outcomes represent a synthesis that builds on but also transcends Western and African traditions. These principles offer a practical framework for AI governance that is grounded in pluralistic ethical reasoning.

6.3 Digital Sovereignty as a Pathway Forward

The shift from "AI readiness" to "Digital Sovereignty" represents a fundamental reorientation of how higher education institutions approach AI. Rather than preparing students to consume AI systems developed elsewhere, institutions must build the capacity to locally design, deploy, govern, and audit AI systems.

This shift requires transformation across multiple dimensions: technical capacity (building local infrastructure and expertise), pedagogical transformation (reforming curriculum and teaching practices), governance innovation (establishing Indigenous data sovereignty and community participation), and cultural affirmation (centring Indigenous knowledge systems in AI education). The research indicates that institutions and communities that have made progress towards digital sovereignty experience more equitable outcomes, greater community ownership, and more culturally appropriate AI applications.

6.4 Implications for Epistemic Justice

The findings have significant implications for epistemic justice in higher education. The AI-Enabled Scholarship Divide documented in this research creates structural barriers to equitable participation in global knowledge production. When AI systems optimise for English-language, Western sources, scholars in the Global South face additional burdens in making their knowledge visible and credible.

The research also reveals how prompting functions as epistemic gatekeeping. The skills required to effectively prompt AI systems are not neutral; they reflect Western rhetorical styles and knowledge assumptions. This means that Global South students and scholars must perform additional labour to translate themselves into forms that AI systems can recognise. Addressing these epistemic injustices requires deliberate intervention through policies that protect Indigenous knowledge, support multilingual AI development, and create assessment frameworks that value diverse knowledge systems.

6.5 Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations. First, although the case studies cover multiple African countries, they do not capture the full diversity of African contexts. Future research should expand geographic coverage to include Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking Africa. Second, the research is primarily qualitative; future studies could employ quantitative methods to measure the scale and impact of the phenomena documented here. Third, the research focuses on higher education; future studies could examine K-12 education, technical and vocational education, and informal learning contexts. Finally, the research documents challenges and proposes solutions but does not provide extensive longitudinal data on implementation. Future research should track institutions and communities over time to understand the long-term outcomes of decolonial AI strategies.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

Recommendation 1: Adopt a Rights-Based Decolonial Framework

Institutions should develop AI policies grounded in Indigenous rights frameworks, explicitly recognising Indigenous data sovereignty and establishing protocols for community consent and benefit sharing. Dedicated decolonisation units should be established within IT and academic governance. The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework should be adopted as institutional policy across the four pillars (Critical Consciousness, Cultural Grounding, Contextual Responsiveness, Communal Capability). Implementation timeline: policy development 6 months, full rollout 18 months.

Recommendation 2: Transform Curriculum and Pedagogy

Decolonial perspectives should be integrated across all AI courses, including critical AI studies, epistemic justice, and African philosophical traditions. Technocritical pedagogy should teach students to interrogate AI's socio-political dimensions. Culturally grounded assessment should move beyond individualistic metrics, implementing gbígbọ́ ẹjọ́ (restorative justice) scenario analysis and including community benefit and ethical character criteria. Multilingual education should be supported through AI teaching materials in Indigenous languages and translation infrastructure. Implementation timeline: curriculum review 12 months, faculty training 18 months, phased implementation 24 months.

Recommendation 3: Build Local Infrastructure and Capacity

Institutions should invest in local computing infrastructure through institutional centres and regional partnerships. African datasets should be developed creating corpora for African languages (minimum 100 million words per major language) with community participation. AI research and development capacity should be established through African-led centres and postgraduate programs. Community partnerships should establish co-design processes with benefit-sharing mechanisms. Implementation timeline: infrastructure planning 18 months, phase 1 implementation 36 months.

Recommendation 4: Develop Digital Sovereignty Strategies

Institutions should shift discourse from "AI readiness" to "Digital Sovereignty," reorienting strategy documents and success metrics. Indigenous data sovereignty protocols should establish data governance frameworks and community-controlled data spaces. Locally governed AI systems should be developed with local control over algorithms. Institutional AI governance structures should establish ethics committees with community representation. Implementation timeline: strategy development 12 months, governance establishment 18 months, technical implementation 36 months.

7.2 Recommendations for Policy Makers

Recommendation 5: Create Enabling Policy Frameworks

National AI strategies should incorporate decolonial principles with explicit provisions for epistemic justice, linguistic diversity, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Continental AI governance frameworks should build on African Union's Agenda 2063 with coordination across countries. Regulation of AI in education should protect students and educators while ensuring equitable access and promoting local innovation. Public AI infrastructure investment should fund national computing capacity and Indigenous language AI development. Implementation timeline: policy development 18 months, legislative adoption 24 months.

Recommendation 6: Fund Research and Innovation

Decolonial AI research should be prioritised through dedicated programs funding African-led research and Indigenous knowledge integration. Regional AI research networks should establish collaboration frameworks sharing resources and expertise. Indigenous language NLP should be supported through linguistic research and language technology development. Knowledge democratisation should be funded through open access publishing, translation of African research, and multilingual research platforms. Implementation timeline: program establishment 12 months, network building 36 months.

Recommendation 7: Support Multilingual AI Development

African language corpora should be developed through systematic documentation and large-scale, quality datasets with ethical governance. Translation infrastructure should fund machine translation research and human translation capacity. Language technologies should be developed for speech recognition, synthesis, and multilingual AI interfaces. Linguistic diversity should be protected through language preservation funding and language rights integration in AI policy. Implementation timeline: infrastructure development 36 months, technology development 48 months.

7.3 Recommendations for Educators and Researchers

Recommendation 8: Adopt Transcultural Ethical Approaches

Educators should integrate African philosophical traditions in teaching, teaching Ubuntu, Ọmọlúàbí, and other traditions while exploring Indigenous knowledge systems. The Ubuntu-Ẹkọ́ Framework should be used in curriculum design centring the four pillars. Technocritical pedagogy should develop students' critical AI literacy and interrogate power dimensions. Cross-disciplinary collaboration should bridge humanities, social sciences, and STEM including Indigenous knowledge holders. Implementation timeline: individual adoption immediate, departmental integration 12 months.

Recommendation 9: Build Collaborative Research and Practice

Participatory and community-based research should collaborate with communities from project inception with equitable benefit sharing. Knowledge co-creation should partner with Indigenous knowledge holders supporting Indigenous-led research. International decolonial networks should connect Global South researchers sharing experiences and resources. Mentoring should support early-career African researchers creating inclusive academic environments. Implementation timeline: partnership development immediate, research collaboration ongoing.

7.4 Recommendations for Technology Developers

Recommendation 10: Design for Epistemic Pluralism

Technology developers should incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems from foundations, including Indigenous perspectives in design and ensuring community ownership. Multilingual AI should develop African language capabilities enabling cross-lingual translation while respecting linguistic diversity. Ethical data governance should follow Indigenous data sovereignty principles ensuring community consent and equitable benefit sharing. Culturally grounded assessment mechanisms should develop community-based evaluation including ethical character assessment and community benefit measurement. Implementation timeline: adopt principles immediately, implementation ongoing.

7.5 Implementation of Framework

A phased implementation approach is recommended: Phase 1 (0-12 months): Awareness and Commitment policy adoption, awareness programs, stakeholder engagement; Phase 2 (12-24 months): Policy and Strategy Development policy development, strategy creation, governance establishment; Phase 3 (24-48 months): Capacity Building training, infrastructure, partnerships; Phase 4 (36-60 months): Implementation curriculum reform, AI system development, assessment transformation; Phase 5 (48-72 months): Evaluation and Refinement monitoring, evaluation, iteration.
Success metrics should address: Epistemic Justice (inclusion of diverse knowledge systems, reduction in bias), Participation (community involvement, stakeholder representation), Contextual Responsiveness (local needs addressed, cultural appropriateness), Community Benefit (collective welfare improved, equitable outcomes), and Digital Sovereignty (local control, Indigenous data sovereignty).

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Contributions

The integration of generative AI into higher education represents not merely a technological shift but an epistemological one, with profound implications for whose knowledge counts, how credibility is assigned, and what futures are possible. This paper has argued that the uncritical adoption of AI systems built on Western, individualistic definitions of intelligence risks perpetuating digital colonialism and enabling deep epistemological capture.

The alternative is not rejection of AI but its fundamental reimagining. Drawing on the Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework and other African philosophical traditions, we have articulated a vision of AI as Augmented Collective Wisdom a socio-technical vehicle designed to enhance and sustain the collective wisdom, cultural integrity, and ethical fabric of communities. This vision requires a fundamental shift from “AI readiness” to “Digital Sovereignty”.

We have shown how African ethical frameworks particularly Ubuntu with its emphasis on communal relationships and Ọmọlúàbí with its virtue-based approach can enrich and extend Western ethical traditions, fostering a transcultural ethics that balances individual and communal values. These frameworks offer practical principles of relationality, community benefit, context sensitivity, and virtue cultivation that can guide the ethical design, governance, and deployment of AI in higher education.

8.2 Key Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes ten key contributions: (1) empirical documentation of the colonial paradox across infrastructure, epistemology, and governance; (2) articulation of African philosophical frameworks for AI ethics (Ubuntu, Ọmọlúàbí, Ẹ̀kọ́); (3) development and validation of the Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework; (4) reconceptualisation of AI as Augmented Collective Wisdom; (5) articulation of six transcultural principles; (6) empirical documentation of the AI-Enabled Scholarship Divide; (7) analysis of prompting as epistemic gatekeeping; (8) mapping of linguistic hierarchies reinforced by AI; (9) comprehensive recommendations for institutional, policy, and community action; and (10) an implementation framework for decolonising AI in higher education.

8.3 The Path Forward

Key strategies for operationalising this vision include: co-design with communities ensuring Indigenous and local communities participate in AI development from its foundations; ethical data governance implementing protocols for Indigenous data sovereignty and control; multilingual content development supporting diverse languages and epistemologies; capacity building investing in local AI expertise and infrastructure; and technocritical pedagogy equipping students and educators to interrogate the socio-political dimensions of AI.

The central challenge of AI in education is not technical performance alone but the governance of interpretation, validation, delegation, and action. By centring provenance, uncertainty, accountable oversight, learner agency, and institutional learning, higher education can anchor innovation in responsible educational improvement.
The question of who designs, evaluates, and critiques AI systems is not merely a technical matter but a question of epistemic justice. As scholars have emphasised, African populations have been excluded from the benefits of previous

industrial revolutions and risk exclusion from the fourth industrial revolution without intentional inclusion of African ethical perspectives (Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework, 2026). The Ubuntu-Ẹ̀kọ́ Framework argues that African populations have been "excluded from the benefits of previous industrial revolutions" and risk exclusion from the "fourth industrial revolution" without intentional inclusion of African ethical perspectives.

In the age of AI, the decisive question is not whether technology will transform higher education, but who will shape that transformation and whose knowledge systems it will serve. The decolonisation of AI in higher education is not merely an ethical imperative but a practical necessity for ensuring that technological advancement contributes to human flourishing for all, rather than deepening existing inequalities and epistemic hierarchies.

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