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Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity in African Higher Education: A Thematic Review of Emerging Misconduct, Assessment Vulnerabilities, and Institutional Responses

Iyanuoluwa Samuel Adelakun*[1], Olufemi Adewale Adedokun*[2], Sariat Iyabo Salaam*[3], and Togunloju Taiwo*[4]
[1] *Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria*
[2] *Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Nigeria*
[3] *Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria*
[4] *Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria*
Email Correspondence: adelakuniyanuoluwasamuel@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, is reshaping higher education while creating new challenges for academic integrity. This study examines how the literature describes AI-related academic misconduct, assessment vulnerabilities, institutional governance challenges, and digital inequalities across African higher education contexts. A thematic literature review was conducted using a PRISMA 2020-informed search and screening procedure. Literature published between 2021 and 2026 was identified through Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink, and 49 publications were retained for thematic synthesis after screening. The review indicates that generative AI is associated with emerging forms of academic misconduct, including AI-assisted plagiarism, fabricated references, outsourced writing, and undisclosed AI use. These risks are intensified where conventional assessment relies heavily on unsupervised written tasks and where institutional policies, staff capacity, and digital infrastructure are uneven. The review further suggests that digital inequality shapes not only students' access to AI but also institutions' capacity to govern its use. Rather than treating AI-related misconduct as an isolated problem of student behaviour, the study conceptualises it as an interconnected institutional challenge involving assessment design, governance capacity, digital inequality, and ethical responsibility. The findings support a context-sensitive approach to AI governance that combines clearer institutional policies, assessment redesign, AI literacy, staff development, and equitable digital capacity-building.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Academic Integrity, African Higher Education, Digital Ethics, AI Governance*

ABSTRAK Kecerdasan buatan (AI), khususnya AI generatif, sedang mengubah pendidikan tinggi sekaligus menghadirkan tantangan baru bagi integritas akademik. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana literatur yang ada menggambarkan berbagai bentuk pelanggaran akademik terkait AI, kerentanan dalam sistem penilaian, tantangan tata kelola kelembagaan, serta ketimpangan digital dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi di Afrika. Kajian ini menggunakan tinjauan literatur tematik dengan prosedur pencarian dan penyaringan yang mengikuti panduan PRISMA 2020. Literatur yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2021 dan 2026 diidentifikasi melalui Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, dan SpringerLink, dan sebanyak 49 publikasi dipertahankan untuk sintesis tematik setelah melalui proses penyaringan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa AI generatif berkaitan dengan munculnya berbagai bentuk pelanggaran akademik, termasuk plagiarisme berbantuan AI, pembuatan referensi yang tidak valid atau tidak dapat diverifikasi, penulisan yang dialihdayakan kepada AI, serta penggunaan AI yang tidak diungkapkan. Risiko tersebut semakin besar ketika sistem penilaian konvensional sangat bergantung pada tugas tertulis yang dikerjakan tanpa pengawasan, sementara kebijakan kelembagaan, kapasitas tenaga pendidik, dan infrastruktur digital masih belum merata. Kajian ini juga

menunjukkan bahwa ketimpangan digital tidak hanya memengaruhi akses mahasiswa terhadap AI, tetapi juga kapasitas institusi dalam mengatur dan mengelola penggunaan AI. Alih-alih memandang pelanggaran terkait AI sebagai persoalan yang semata-mata berkaitan dengan perilaku mahasiswa, penelitian ini mengonsepsikan persoalan tersebut sebagai tantangan kelembagaan yang saling berkaitan, melibatkan desain penilaian, kapasitas tata kelola, ketimpangan digital, dan tanggung jawab etis. Temuan penelitian mendukung pendekatan tata kelola AI yang sensitif terhadap konteks, dengan mengombinasikan kebijakan kelembagaan yang lebih jelas, redesain sistem penilaian, peningkatan literasi AI, pengembangan kapasitas tenaga pendidik, serta penguatan kapasitas digital yang lebih merata.

Kata Kunci: *Kecerdasan Buatan, Integritas Akademik, Pendidikan Tinggi di Afrika, Etika Digital, Tata Kelola Kecerdasan Buatan*

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming higher education as it becomes increasingly integrated into teaching, learning, research, assessment, and administrative processes. The expansion of digital education following the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the adoption of AI-based technologies, creating new opportunities for personalised learning, knowledge production, research assistance, and institutional management. In African higher education, AI applications have been reported in areas such as student admission and enrolment, communication, academic supervision, research, innovation, staff development, and institutional administration (Adelakun et al., 2023; Balogun et al., 2025; Pang & Szliter, 2026). More recently, generative AI systems such as ChatGPT and other large language models have expanded these possibilities by enabling students and researchers to generate text, summarise information, organise ideas, and support a range of academic tasks (Kasneci et al., 2023; Lo, 2023). While these developments offer significant educational potential, they also raise important questions about academic integrity and higher education institutions' capacity to govern responsible AI use.

Academic integrity is a fundamental principle of higher education, encompassing honesty, accountability, originality, and responsible scholarly practice. The emergence of generative AI, however, has complicated conventional understandings of academic misconduct because AI-generated content can be produced rapidly and may not directly reproduce existing sources. Recent studies have associated generative AI with emerging forms of misconduct, including AI-assisted plagiarism, ghost-writing, fabricated references, unauthorised collaboration, and undisclosed use of AI in academic work (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Feussi, 2026; Kasneci et al., 2023). Students may use AI tools in assignments, essay writing, coding, paraphrasing, literature reviews, and project development without adequately acknowledging or disclosing such assistance (Chan & Hu, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023). The problem is further complicated by the limitations of conventional plagiarism-detection systems, which may not reliably identify AI-generated text when it does not reproduce previously published material verbatim (Perkins, 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). Generative AI can also produce inaccurate or nonexistent references, raising concerns about the reliability and credibility of academic work (Day, 2023; Eke, 2023).

These developments have significant implications for assessment practices. Many conventional forms of higher education assessment still rely on essays, take-home examinations, written assignments, and other unsupervised tasks that students may complete with substantial assistance from generative AI. Consequently, the challenge is not limited to detecting whether students have used AI; it also concerns whether existing assessment practices can still evaluate

students' knowledge, reasoning, originality, and learning processes. Emerging scholarship has therefore called for greater attention to assessment redesign, including reflective tasks, oral examinations, supervised activities, project-based assessment, and other approaches that require students to demonstrate their reasoning and engagement with the subject matter (Ncube et al., 2025). This shift also requires institutions to reconsider how academic integrity policies define acceptable, inappropriate, and transparent AI use in teaching, learning, and research.

Governing these technologies matters because institutional capacity to respond to AI is not uniform. Effective AI governance requires clear policies, ethical guidelines, institutional mechanisms, staff capacity, and sufficient digital infrastructure to support implementation. UNESCO (UNESCO, n.d.-c, n.d.-d) emphasises principles such as transparency, accountability, fairness, human responsibility, and human-centred values in AI governance. In higher education, these principles apply not only to academic misconduct but also to decisions about assessment, authorship, data use, privacy, and responsible technology adoption. However, research on African higher education indicates that institutions continue to face challenges related to policy development, digital infrastructure, institutional readiness, and digital literacy (Mhlanga, 2023; UNESCO, n.d.-a). These conditions suggest that institutional responses to AI cannot be separated from the broader technological and organisational contexts in which African higher education institutions operate.

Digital inequality adds another important dimension to this challenge. Differences in access to reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, AI tools, technical support, and digital literacy may shape how students and academic staff encounter and use generative AI. At the institutional level, unequal digital capacity may also affect universities' ability to develop policies, provide staff training, implement appropriate assessment systems, and establish mechanisms for responsible AI governance. Thus, the consequences of AI adoption cannot be understood solely by whether students have access to AI technologies. They also involve differences in institutional capacity to manage those technologies ethically and effectively. This perspective is particularly relevant to African higher education, where institutions operate within diverse socioeconomic, technological, and educational environments rather than a single homogeneous context.

Against this background, digital ethics provides a useful analytical lens for examining the relationship between AI adoption and academic integrity. Rather than referring to a single uniform framework, digital ethics encompasses principles concerned with transparency, accountability, fairness, responsibility, human oversight, and the responsible use of digital technologies (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Guenduez et al., 2025). Applying these principles to higher education makes it possible to examine AI-related academic integrity not simply as student misconduct, but as a broader institutional issue involving assessment practices, governance arrangements, technological capacity, and ethical responsibility. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts where institutions have different levels of access to technological resources and different capacities to formulate and implement AI-related policies.

Recent scholarship has begun to examine AI and academic integrity in African higher education, including questions of institutional readiness, ethical challenges, assessment, and governance. For example, Rugeiyamu et al. (2026) provide a systematic review of higher education responses to artificial intelligence and academic integrity in Africa. Other studies have examined AI readiness, assessment challenges, ethical dilemmas, and institutional governance in specific African contexts (Guadu et al., 2025; Muringa, 2025; Naphiyo et al., 2026; Ncube et al., 2025; Sangwa et al., 2026). However, the literature remains dispersed across different aspects of the problem. A thematic synthesis is therefore needed to bring together emerging forms of AI-related academic misconduct, assessment vulnerabilities, institutional governance, and digital inequality, and to consider how these dimensions interact within African higher education contexts.

Accordingly, this study conducts a thematic review of the existing literature on AI and academic integrity in African higher education. It focuses on four interconnected dimensions: emerging forms of AI-related academic misconduct, vulnerabilities in assessment practices, institutional governance responses, and the role of digital inequality in shaping institutional capacity to manage AI. By bringing these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of the academic integrity challenges associated with generative AI and to identify implications for context-sensitive institutional responses. The study ultimately argues for an approach to AI governance that combines clearer institutional policies, assessment redesign, AI literacy, staff development, and equitable digital capacity-building, rather than relying primarily on detecting and preventing student misconduct.

METHOD

This study adopted a thematic literature review informed by the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA made the search, screening, and selection process transparent; however, this study is not a formal systematic review. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink for literature published between 2021 and 2026. The search combined terms related to artificial intelligence and generative AI with terms related to academic integrity, misconduct, plagiarism, assessment, governance, and African higher education. The search syntax was adapted to each database's requirements and repeated between March and September 2026.

The core search string combined the following conceptual groups: ("artificial intelligence" OR "generative AI" OR ChatGPT OR "large language model" OR "AI-assisted") AND ("academic integrity" OR "academic misconduct" OR plagiarism OR "academic dishonesty" OR assessment OR "research integrity") AND (Africa OR African OR Nigeria OR "South Africa" OR Ghana OR Kenya OR "sub-Saharan Africa"). The search strategy aimed to capture literature that explicitly linked AI to integrity or assessment issues in African higher education, while the screening process removed studies that did not substantively address the review questions.

The initial search yielded 209 records. After removing 93 duplicates, 116 records remained for title and abstract screening. We excluded 67 records because they did not meet the relevance criteria, leaving 49 publications for full thematic synthesis. Figure 1 summarises the selection process. Because the available literature is unevenly distributed across African countries and institutional contexts, the synthesis focuses on patterns in the reviewed literature rather than claiming continent-wide empirical representativeness.

Screening involved title and abstract assessment followed by full-text examination. Publications were considered relevant when they addressed at least one of the following: AI or generative AI in higher education; academic integrity or misconduct; assessment practices; institutional governance or regulation; or digital inequality affecting AI adoption. We included studies published between 2021 and 2026 that addressed AI-related technologies, focused on higher education or tertiary learning, and provided substantive discussion or evidence relevant to the review questions. We excluded publications that focused exclusively on non-tertiary education, were unrelated to AI and academic integrity, or lacked sufficient relevance to the African higher education context. Given the literature's heterogeneity, the review did not attempt to combine findings statistically.

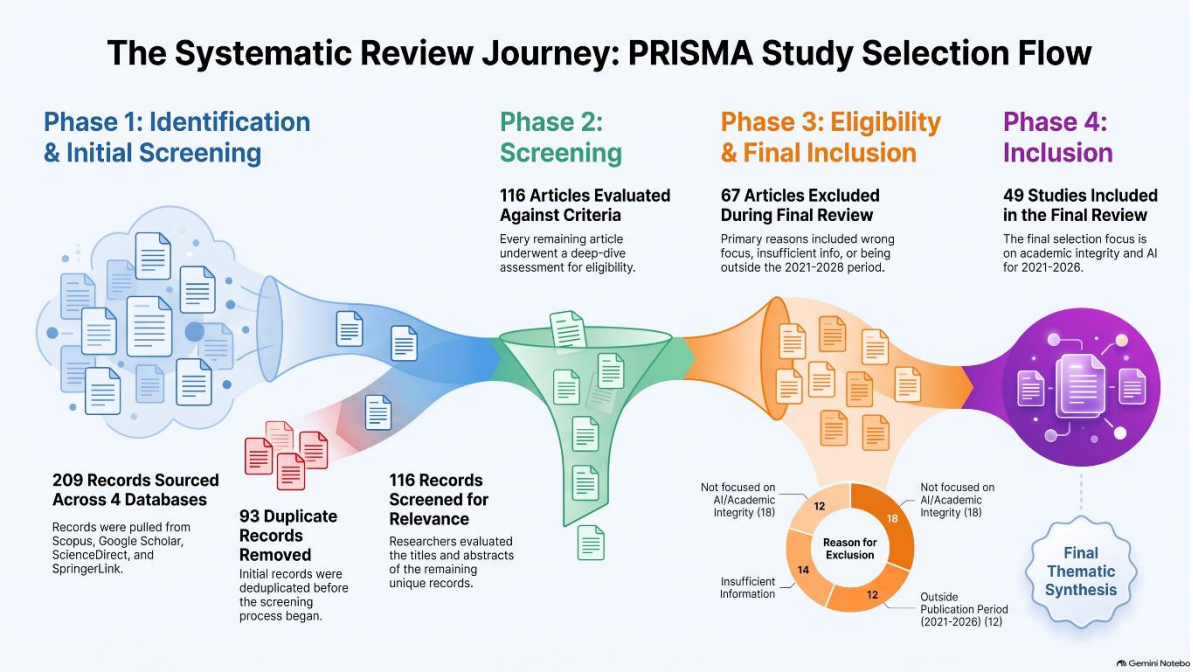

Figure 1. PRISMA-Informed Flow Diagram of Study Selection

Source: Authors' construction based on the publications' search and screening processes (2026)

Data were extracted using a structured matrix covering author, year, country or region, study purpose, research design, educational context, AI application, integrity concern, institutional response, and principal findings. The literature was then analysed thematically using the general procedures associated with Braun and Clarke (2006) familiarisation with the corpus, initial coding, identification of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and synthesis of the final thematic structure. Coding combined inductive attention to recurring findings with deductive attention to the ethical principles of transparency, accountability, fairness, responsibility, and human oversight. This hybrid approach kept the review grounded in the literature while examining how the findings relate to broader questions of digital ethics and AI governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The literature search identified 209 records from Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink. After removing 93 duplicate records, 116 publications remained for title and abstract screening. We then excluded 67 publications after screening and full-text assessment because they did not meet the inclusion criteria or were not sufficiently relevant to AI, academic integrity, assessment, governance, or African higher education. The final synthesis therefore included 49 publications from 2021 to 2026. Figure 1 presents the selection process in a PRISMA-informed flow diagram.

The 49 publications addressed different aspects of artificial intelligence and academic integrity in African higher education. The literature was geographically uneven, with substantial attention given to contexts such as South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, while evidence from other African countries was more limited. The reviewed publications also varied in their research designs, ranging from conceptual and qualitative studies to reviews and institutional analyses. Despite this diversity, the thematic synthesis identified four closely related patterns:

emerging forms of AI-related academic misconduct, vulnerabilities in assessment practices, institutional governance challenges, and digital inequality.

Table 1. Thematic Synthesis of AI-Related Academic Integrity Challenges in African Higher Education

Theme	Main Findings from the Reviewed Literature	Key Issues Identified	Institutional Implications
AI-related academic misconduct	Generative AI is associated with emerging forms of academic misconduct and undisclosed AI use.	AI-assisted plagiarism, AI-generated writing, outsourced writing, fabricated/unverifiable references, unauthorised collaboration.	Institutions need clearer definitions of acceptable and unacceptable AI use and transparent disclosure requirements.
Assessment vulnerabilities	Conventional assessment practices, particularly unsupervised written tasks, are increasingly vulnerable to AI-assisted completion.	Take-home examinations, essays, written assignments, and limited visibility of students' learning processes are vulnerable.	Assessment redesign should incorporate reflection, oral explanation, supervised activities, and process-based evidence.
Institutional governance	Institutional responses vary in policy development, implementation, staff preparedness, and AI governance capacity.	Policy ambiguity, limited staff training, uneven institutional readiness, and difficulties in implementing AI policies.	Institutions require adaptable AI policies, governance mechanisms, staff development, and continuous policy review.
Digital inequality	Unequal access to connectivity, devices, digital literacy, technical resources, and institutional infrastructure shapes AI adoption and governance capacity.	Uneven access to AI, limited infrastructure, differences in digital literacy and institutional resources.	AI governance needs to account for differences in institutional resources and digital capacity across contexts.

The first theme concerns emerging forms of AI-related academic misconduct. Across the reviewed literature, generative AI was associated with several forms of academic misconduct, including AI-assisted plagiarism, undisclosed AI-generated writing, outsourced academic writing, fabricated or unverifiable references, and unauthorised collaboration. The literature also indicated that students may employ generative AI for essay writing, paraphrasing, coding, literature summaries, and other academic tasks. These practices do not necessarily constitute misconduct in every circumstance; rather, their academic integrity implications depend on institutional policies, the purpose of AI use, and whether such use is disclosed and authorised.

The second theme concerns vulnerabilities in existing assessment practices. The synthesis indicates that assessments relying heavily on unsupervised written assignments, take-home examinations, essays, and similar forms of individual work are particularly exposed to AI-assisted completion. The literature suggests that generative AI's increasing capacity to produce coherent academic responses creates difficulties for assessment approaches that primarily evaluate the final written product rather than the student's learning process. Several publications therefore call for

reconsidering assessment practices and incorporating approaches that provide stronger evidence of students' reasoning, reflection, engagement, and individual understanding.

The third theme concerns institutional governance. The reviewed literature indicates considerable variation in how institutions develop and implement AI use policies. Some institutions have begun to formulate guidelines addressing acceptable AI use, academic integrity, assessment, and responsible technology adoption. At the same time, other contexts still face uncertainty about how to regulate generative AI. The synthesis also identifies institutional capacity as an important factor, particularly staff preparedness, AI literacy, policy implementation, and the ability to redesign assessment practices.

The fourth theme concerns digital inequality. The reviewed publications indicate that differences in internet connectivity, digital devices, technical resources, digital literacy, and institutional infrastructure shape access to AI technologies. These differences affect not only students' ability to use AI but also academic staff and institutional capacity to respond to its emergence. Institutions with limited technological infrastructure and staff development opportunities may face greater difficulties in establishing effective AI governance, providing appropriate training, and implementing technologically supported assessment practices.

Taken together, the four themes indicate that AI-related academic integrity challenges are interconnected rather than isolated. The literature shows relationships among the increasing availability of generative AI, the vulnerability of conventional assessment practices, differences in institutional governance capacity, and unequal digital conditions. Figure 2 presents the resulting synthesis conceptually. The model should be understood as a conceptual synthesis of patterns identified in the reviewed literature, not as a tested causal model.

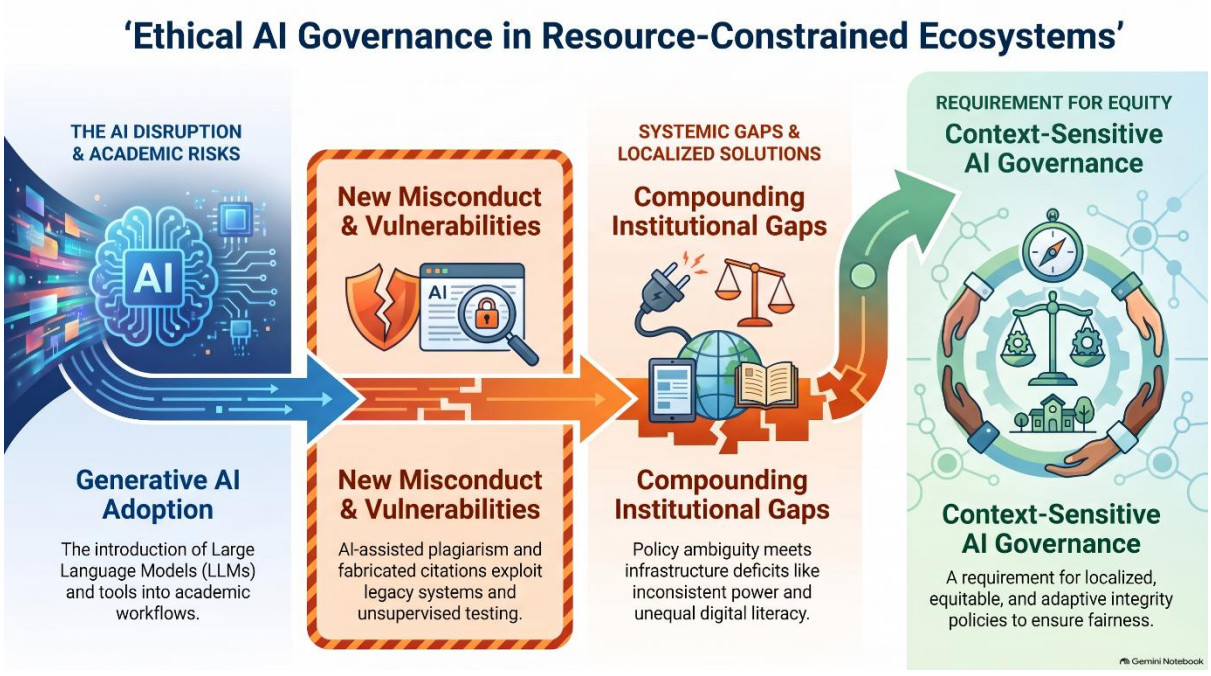

Figure 2. Conceptual Model for Ethical AI Governance in Resource-Constrained Ecosystems

Discussion

The findings indicate that generative AI has expanded the scope of academic integrity challenges in higher education. This finding aligns with earlier research showing that large language models can generate academic text, assist with problem-solving, and support a range

of educational activities while also creating new opportunities for academic misconduct (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Eke, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). For example, researchers have highlighted concerns about using generative AI in academic writing, including questions of authorship, originality, fabricated references, and the reliability of AI-generated information. This review extends the discussion by showing that these concerns are not limited to individual student behaviour but are closely connected to assessment practices and institutional responses in African higher education.

The finding on assessment vulnerability also aligns with recent scholarship on assessment in AI-mediated learning environments. Ncube et al. (2025) argues that conventional assessment arrangements face increasing challenges as generative AI becomes more capable of producing written academic responses. Similarly, the literature reviewed in this study suggests that assessment systems based predominantly on unsupervised written work may provide limited evidence of students' independent reasoning when AI assistance is readily available. This does not mean that written assignments are inherently inappropriate in the age of AI. Rather, the findings suggest that institutions need to reconsider how they design written assignments and how they make learning processes more visible through reflection, oral explanation, supervised activities, or other complementary forms of assessment.

The governance findings reinforce the importance of institutional rather than exclusively individual responses. UNESCO (UNESCO, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) emphasises transparency, accountability, fairness, and human responsibility as key principles for AI governance. These principles are particularly relevant to higher education because institutional policies need to distinguish between legitimate educational uses of AI and practices that undermine academic integrity. The findings of this review are also consistent with studies examining AI governance and institutional readiness in African higher education, which identify policy uncertainty, limited institutional capacity, and uneven preparedness as continuing challenges (Muringa, 2025; Sangwa et al., 2026). This implies that academic integrity policies need implementation mechanisms, staff development, student guidance, and regular revision as AI technologies evolve.

Digital inequality adds an important dimension to existing discussions of AI governance. Much of the broader debate about generative AI in education focuses on whether students have access to AI tools. The reviewed literature suggests that the issue is broader: institutions themselves differ in their capacity to respond to AI. Differences in connectivity, digital infrastructure, technical expertise, and staff development can affect whether an institution can implement AI policies, redesign assessments, and provide meaningful AI literacy. This finding corresponds with broader discussions of AI readiness in Sub-Saharan African higher education, which emphasise differences in institutional preparedness and digital capacity (Naphiyo et al., 2026). Consequently, a governance model developed for a highly resourced university cannot necessarily be transferred directly to institutions operating under substantially different technological conditions.

The findings also contribute to the emerging African literature on academic integrity and AI by bringing together issues that are often examined separately. Guadu et al. (2025) for example, some studies focus on academic integrity challenges and strategies in African higher education, while others address AI readiness, institutional governance, assessment, or ethical adoption more specifically. Rugeiyamu et al. (2026) similarly systematically examine higher education responses to AI and academic integrity in Africa. The present synthesis complements these studies by organising the literature around four interconnected dimensions, misconduct, assessment, governance, and digital inequality, and by interpreting their relationship through principles of digital ethics.

From a digital ethics perspective, the findings suggest that responsible AI adoption requires more than technological regulation or misconduct detection. Transparency relates to disclosing AI use; accountability concerns the responsibilities of students, lecturers, and institutions; fairness requires attention to unequal access and institutional capacity; and human oversight remains important when AI is incorporated into academic processes. These principles are consistent with the ethical approaches discussed by Floridi & Cowls (2019), UNESCO, (n.d.-c, n.d.-c) and other scholarship on responsible AI. In this sense, digital ethics provides an analytical lens for connecting academic integrity with broader questions of institutional responsibility and technological governance.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that all African higher education institutions experience AI-related challenges in the same way. The geographic distribution of the reviewed literature is uneven, and the institutional contexts represented in the literature differ in terms of resources, policy environments, digital infrastructure, and levels of AI adoption. The findings therefore support a context-sensitive, rather than uniform, model of AI governance. This matters because policies that rely heavily on technological detection mechanisms may be hard to implement in institutions with limited infrastructure. In contrast, policies designed without considering local educational practices may have limited practical relevance.

The synthesis consequently points toward a combination of institutional and pedagogical responses. Clear policies are necessary to define acceptable and unacceptable AI use, but policies alone are unlikely to resolve the challenges identified in the literature. Assessment redesign can reduce excessive dependence on unsupervised written assignments, while AI literacy can help students and academic staff understand both the possibilities and limitations of generative AI. Staff development is similarly important because lecturers require the capacity to interpret institutional policies, redesign assessments, and engage students in responsible AI use. Finally, implementing AI governance equitably across different higher education contexts requires investment in digital infrastructure and institutional capacity.

Overall, the discussion suggests approaching AI-related academic integrity as an interconnected institutional challenge rather than solely a problem of student misconduct. The significance of the findings lies in the interaction between technological change, assessment practices, institutional governance, and digital inequality. This interpretation does not establish a causal relationship among these dimensions; rather, it provides a conceptual explanation of the patterns identified across the 49 publications reviewed in this study. The resulting perspective supports a more comprehensive approach to AI governance in African higher education, combining academic integrity, assessment reform, ethical principles, institutional capacity, and attention to unequal digital conditions.

CONCLUSION

This review indicates that the rapid integration of generative AI is placing substantial pressure on established academic-integrity and assessment arrangements across the African higher education contexts represented in the literature. The evidence points to emerging forms of AI-related misconduct, including AI-assisted plagiarism, fabricated references, outsourced academic work, and undisclosed use. Assessment practices, institutional governance, staff and student AI literacy, and uneven digital capacity shape these risks. The review therefore frames AI-related academic integrity as an interconnected institutional challenge rather than solely an issue of individual student behaviour.

The study's conceptual contribution is an integrated model linking AI adoption, misconduct risks, assessment vulnerabilities, governance capacity, and digital inequality. The model is not presented as a tested causal theory; rather, it provides a framework for organising

relationships that recur across the reviewed literature. Its value lies in showing why context matters: the implications of generative AI depend not only on the technology itself but also on the assessment and governance conditions in which it is used. For universities and policymakers, the findings support a shift from detection-centred responses toward broader, context-sensitive governance. Institutions should develop clear policies, transparent expectations, assessment redesign, AI literacy, staff development, and equitable digital capacity as complementary measures. Such an approach can help institutions distinguish legitimate AI-supported learning from misconduct while reducing the risk that academic-integrity policies disproportionately affect students or institutions with fewer digital resources.

The review has several limitations. It relies on secondary literature published between 2021 and 2026, and the available evidence is unevenly distributed across African countries and institutional contexts. Database selection and reliance on Google Scholar may also affect the search's completeness and reproducibility. The literature includes heterogeneous study designs and does not provide a basis for statistically estimating the prevalence or causal effects of AI-related misconduct. In addition, the rapid development of generative AI means that some findings may become outdated as technologies, policies, and institutional practices change. Future research should therefore combine comparative and longitudinal empirical studies with review-based synthesis to examine how AI governance develops across different African higher education systems.

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