The Need for AI Policies in African Universities: Evidence from Built Environment Students' Perspectives

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SUMMARY

The rapid proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots in higher education has created an urgent policy vacuum in African universities. This study examines the perceptions of Built Environment students regarding the use of AI chatbots and reveals a critical disconnect between widespread student adoption and institutional governance frameworks. Through descriptive statistical analysis of survey data, we document that 74% of students already use AI chatbots for academic purposes, with predominantly positive perceptions ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.75$) and strong beliefs in their learning support capabilities ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.69$). However, students report minimal institutional guidance ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.37$), exposing a governance gap that threatens academic integrity, educational equity, and effective pedagogy. A continental scan reveals that while South African universities, such as the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, the University of Pretoria, and the University of Johannesburg, have developed AI guidelines since 2024, most African institutions lack formal AI policies, despite high usage rates among students. This policy vacuum contrasts sharply with developments in the United States, where nearly 70% of universities have adopted written AI policies or guidelines. This paper argues that African higher institutions must urgently develop comprehensive and contextually appropriate AI governance frameworks to harness the educational benefits while mitigating ethical risks. We present evidence of the current state, analyse the consequences of policy inaction, and propose a roadmap for institutional AI policy development tailored to African higher education contexts.

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