

Institutionalising AI In Higher Education: A Case Study At A South African University

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Abstract— This study examines the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a traditional South African university, focusing on the strategies used to incorporate AI into its teaching and learning environment. It aims to identify how AI adoption gains legitimacy within established academic structures. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research analyses documents such as institutional policies and strategic plans from the past three years across various faculties. Guided by Legitimacy Theory, the study explores how AI becomes accepted in educational practices, aiming to identify key success factors and challenges in its institutionalization. The findings will contribute to the broader discussion on educational innovation and provide insights for navigating change in higher education, offering guidance for similar efforts worldwide. The study examines the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a traditional South African university, focusing on the strategies used to incorporate AI into its teaching and learning environment. It aims to identify how AI adoption gains legitimacy within established academic structures. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research analyses documents such as institutional policies and strategic plans from the past three years across various faculties. Guided by Legitimacy Theory, the study explores how AI becomes accepted in educational practices, aiming to identify key success factors and challenges in its institutionalization. The findings will contribute to the broader discussion on educational innovation and provide insights for navigating change in higher education, offering guidance for similar efforts worldwide.

Keywords— Institutionalisation, Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education, Integration, Legitimacy Theory, Educational Innovation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education globally has prompted academics to rethink and reshape how learning, teaching, assessment, and research are conducted. In South African higher education, integrating AI comes with its own constraints and enablers due to historical inequalities, the digital divide, and differentiated institutional capacities. To create and promote a more sustainable and equitable AI environment, it is important to understand how universities institutionalize AI. Therefore, the study examines the processes and strategies by which AI is legitimized and institutionalized in a traditional university in South Africa to formalize adoption within teaching and learning. Emerging South African scholarship speaks to these dynamics. Tarisayi's socio-technical analysis of ChatGPT in South African universities highlights simultaneous opportunity and risk, arguing for agile institutional governance rather than reactionary prohibitions (Tarisayi, 2024). Funda & Piderit's systematic review finds that "the advent of AI has revolutionised the learning environment through intelligent learning, increasing collaborations, promoting active learning, sharing resources, delivering distance education through virtual learning, and improving

pedagogical systems” (Funda & Piderit, 2024). Another systematic review focused on South African higher education reports growing student use of generative AI to aid learning, alongside persistent concerns about plagiarism, uneven digital access, and the need for context-specific policies (Sokhulu, Zulu & Lott-Naidoo, 2025). At the institutional level, sector reports document fragmented, university-by-university responses, ranging from interim guidelines to formal AI policies, highlighting the importance of legitimacy-building through clear frameworks, capacity development, and ethical principles (USAf DELT CoP, 2025; NWU AI Policy 2025). The importance and premise of this study lies in the realization that adoption of a new phenomenon in institutional spaces takes a process with varying levels, as alluded to in some of the literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, AI adoption in higher education is growing, enhancing and enabling learning and intelligent tutoring systems, assessment redesign, feedback as well as predictive analytics but this is still accompanied by governance and integrity concerns (Kumar, 2024). In Africa a similar pattern of adoption is taking place more slowly than in the global world; AI is seen to widen access, personalize learning and streamline administration, yet roll-out is constrained by infrastructural inequalities, skill gaps and policy-ethics readiness (Maluleke, 2025; Pasipamire et al., 2025). In South Africa (SA) specifically, the post-2022 surge of generative AI prompted rapid experimentation by students and staff and uneven institutional responses. A socio-technical lens on South African universities highlights academics' hopes for enrichment of scholarship alongside fears of bias, diminished critical thinking, and employment impacts, arguing for frameworks that align with academic integrity (Tarisayi, 2024). Complementary reviews centred on SA student learning report practical benefits like on-demand explanation, drafting support, and language mediation but warn about over-reliance, plagiarism risks, and the digital divide's effect on equitable access (Sokhulu et al., 2025; Khoalenyane & Ajani, 2024). Nationally, sector bodies and universities have begun codifying responses. The Council on Higher Education's Kagisano (2024) foregrounds opportunities in student support and curriculum planning, while cautioning about fairness, transparency and integrity. Universities South Africa's 2025 DELT CoP dialogue documents policy and guidelines development at NWU, UWC and UJ, noting tensions between enabling innovation and mitigating misconduct. Several other institutions have issued or updated guidance: UCT produced staff and student guides in 2023 and, in 2025, adopted an AI Education Framework that moves away from unreliable AI-detectors towards AI literacy, assessment redesign and equity; UKZN Senate approved principles and guidelines effective January 2025; NWU progressed from guidelines to an institution-wide policy 2025. In parallel, national policy work is advancing, including a draft National AI Policy Framework emphasising human-centred, ethical, transparent use and cross-sector coordination (DCDT, 2024). Recent studies in the South African higher education environment indicate a growing but fragmented adoption of technology across universities. Tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and DeepSeek are commonly used by students informally due to the lack of guidance provided by different institutions (Muringa, 2025). This situation has led to several challenges, including concerns about academic integrity, ambiguities regarding ghostwriting versus legitimate assistance, uneven capacity among universities, policy gaps, ethical issues, and biased practices.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is the Legitimacy Theory by Suchman, (1995). Legitimacy theory is used a lens to understand how higher education institutions adopt

new innovations in teaching, learning, assessment and research. Legitimacy theory is defined as “a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate with some socially constructed systems norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995). According to Francesconi (2009), practices are deemed legitimate when they are clear in rhetorical terms, justified and applied procedurally, and shown to be effective in both practical and ethical aspects of practice. Thus, legitimacy as a framework involves value addition, visibility, justification, procedural application, and relevance, particularly concerning the innovation or intervention of AI. This suggests that the use and integration of AI tools would be viewed as appropriate, as it serves to further the institutional values, mission, and vision. Deephouse and Suchman (2008) outline a schema with various dimensions of legitimacy as follows: Strategic Legitimacy relates to managerial control and agency; Institutional Legitimacy concerns established beliefs and cultural frameworks; Pragmatic Legitimacy pertains to the practical consequences of a specific line of activity; Influence Legitimacy is based on the responsiveness to broader interests and a commitment to the well-being of constituents; Dispositional Legitimacy involves positive and negative evaluations of a unit's activities, shaping general perceptions of its legitimacy; Consequential Legitimacy is determined by achievements, effectiveness measures, and outputs; Procedural Legitimacy considers whether socially accepted techniques and procedures, which carry a positive moral value, are embraced; Structural Legitimacy concerns the organizational characteristics and socially constructed capacity to perform specific types of work, focusing on consistent procedures that are replicated over time; Personal Legitimacy relates to moral entrepreneurship, where exemplary conduct impacts the disruption of old institutional practices and the initiation of new ones; Cognitive Legitimacy pertains to how comprehensible and taken for granted the unit is by others. These various dimensions collectively contribute to the understanding of legitimacy within institutional contexts. Building on Suchman (1995), legitimacy may be pragmatic, moral or cognitive, with distinct strategies for gaining, maintaining, and repairing legitimacy useful for tracing how universities move from experimental AI pilots to taken-for-granted practices (Suchman, 1995). Deephouse & Suchman (2008) further map sources, processes, and outcomes of legitimation, clarifying how policy codification, stakeholder endorsement, and public discourse interact in institutional settings. Rhetorical perspectives show that legitimation often proceeds via institutional vocabularies and theorization of change, and that shifts from interfield to intrafield rhetoric mark movement from contestation to institutionalisation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Harmon et al., 2015). Lastly, procedural legitimacy, embedding fair, accepted techniques, matters for compliance and acceptance, emphasising why transparent guidelines, declarations, and review mechanisms can stabilize AI practices in universities (Tyler, 2003; Murphy, Tyler & Curtis, 2009). This literature suggests that institutionalisation in South African Higher Education hinges on legitimacy work, involving crafting of clear principles, integrating disclosure practices, building AI literacy, and aligning AI use with institutional missions and national policy directions. It also indicates that capacity and infrastructure disparities will shape differential adoption across faculties and institutions, requiring phased implementation, targeted support, and ongoing evaluation (Maluleke, 2025; Khoalenyane & Ajani, 2024).

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Paradigm

The research is based on an interpretive framework that aims to comprehend the phenomenon of AI and its processes of institutionalization and legitimization within a higher education institution. The beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie this

paradigm examine "socially meaningful interactions by considering experiences in context, leading to an understanding of how tools create and maintain their legitimacy in social settings" (Neuman, 1997). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm is ideal, relevant, and appropriate as it analyses reports and institutional documents regarding the adoption of technological tools in teaching and learning.

B. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study approach to gain in-depth insights and understanding of a contemporary issue within a real-life context (Yin, 2003). This approach involved analysing institutional documents, including meeting minutes, teaching and learning decisions, and records of teaching and learning events produced over the past three years. The focus of this case study is the legitimation and institutionalization of AI at a selected university. The aforementioned authors argue that one reason for using case study research is to uncover the contextual conditions relevant to the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the chosen paradigm and qualitative approach in this study enhance the interpretation of, as well as the embeddedness of, institutional beliefs, values, and assumptions related to the legitimation and institutionalization of AI.

C. Data Collection

The data collection process involved reviewing several official documents, including strategic plans, departmental operational plans, quarterly reports, meeting minutes, approved grant proposals, and institutional teaching and learning policies. Purposive sampling was employed to focus specifically on documents with relevant purposes and insights (Priya, 2020). Consequently, documents were selected based on their capacity to provide data related to the various aspects of legitimacy as outlined in the theoretical framework.

D. Data Analysis

Legitimacy Theory forms the foundation for this analysis, providing insight into how AI tools are framed, justified, and integrated into institutional narratives and practices. This framework enables the study to trace the processes through which AI achieves legitimacy using the different legitimacy dimensions (normative, influence, pragmatic, cognitive, Etc.) within the institution. The researchers aimed to extract significant meanings and insights from institutional documents that address these dimensions of legitimacy through selected excerpts and impactful quotes.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I. Institutional Records through minutes of meetings

The initial agenda that led to the recognition of AI as a contender in the Teaching and Learning space was in early 2022 just after covid19, which involved challenges with student assessment work, like assignments and research work being found to have used AI. Discussions and debates around this matter were uncomfortable as they resulted in questions of the unethical use of the AI tools, irresponsible use, fear of the loss of academic integrity, lack of knowledge about AI by most academics, and guidance for students and staff. See one or two excerpts from the meeting's discussions below:

Excerpt A (Senate Teaching and Learning Committee 2024):

"Members expressed concern that undetected AI-assisted submissions challenge existing assessment policies. The Committee requested interim

guidance on what the plagiarism policy says. There is support for the proposal to develop AI guidelines.”

Excerpt B (Faculty Board, March 2025):

“There is agreement to pilot AI-tools for research, teaching, and learning.”

The above findings indicate that the institution's early response to AI is grounded in Moral legitimacy, as the academic environment viewed the AI tools through an ethical lens as opposed to a strategic or operational lens. This suggests that the process of legitimising AI began with a moral imperative, the desire to do what is right and protect the integrity of teaching, learning, and research.

II. Strategic and Operational plans and documents that led to legitimization and institutionalisation:

The institution also introduced this topic into its strategic agenda in 2024 by submitting a teaching and learning grant proposal to run various activities that will be initiated to capacitate and inform the academic environment about AI usage from teaching, learning and research. The goals and activities submitted included the two excerpts below which evidence institutionalising and legitimization of AI.

Excerpt A

Grant Submission:

Project Goal: To enhance Continuing Professional Development across various domains, encompassing assessment, evaluation, curriculum development, portfolio development, facilitation, and Technology-Enhanced Learning, among others. We aim to empower staff with the proficiency to effectively harness online technology platforms for teaching and learning, while also prioritizing ongoing upskilling and development in the areas of cutting edge Educational Technologies, Artificial Intelligence, and Gamification to support innovative and scholarly teaching and learning practices in both a blended and online space.

Activity 05: Artificial intelligence in teaching workshop for faculties	107,900.00
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Excerpt B

Operational Plan Snapshot

AI Capacity Building & Responsible Use

Scope: Institutional AI guidelines; ethics & academic integrity; CoP; showcase event; student awareness & declarations.

2026 Deliverables per UCDG	KPI Targets	Timeline	Budget/Funding
AI Guidelines (approval & adoption)	Approved by 2026; dissemination to all faculties	Target approval 2026	Grant funding
6 staff workshops	≥6 sessions; ≥180 staff;	2× Q1; 2× Q2.	Grant Funding

(ethical prompting, assessment redesign, tool demos)	≥85% satisfaction	1× Q3; 1× Q4	
4 CoP roundtables	≥4 sessions; cross-faculty participation (≥5 faculties)	1 per quarter	Grant Funding
Piloting of AI tools	2 per year ≥12 participants across faculties;	End 2026	Grant Funding
1 AI Showcase	≥150 attendees; ≥10 case demos	Q3 2026	Grant Funding
4 student awareness drives (incl. AI Declaration)	≥4 campaigns; ≥1,000 student reach	1 per quarter	Grant Funding

The data reflects multiple dimensions of Legitimacy Theory working together to institutionalise AI within the academic environment. Pragmatic legitimacy is evident in the clear activities offered to academics, such as AI workshops, Communities of Practice, piloting of new AI tools, and showcase events that directly enhance staff capacity and student awareness. At the same time, the emphasis on developing AI guidelines, ethics frameworks and academic integrity processes demonstrates moral legitimacy, where the institution signals that the adoption of AI aligns with appropriate, responsible and professionally accepted norms. Lastly, by embedding AI into formal strategic submissions, annual operational plans, KPIs, funding allocations, and multi-year deliverables, the institution fosters cognitive legitimacy. Collectively, these actions show that AI is not an ad hoc initiative but is being legitimised and fully institutionalised as part of the university's ongoing teaching, learning, and research ecosystem.

III. Institutional Events that led to the process of legitimization

These debates and discussions initiated the realisation to go and found out what other institutions are doing about this phenomenon. Create platforms for awareness and sharing of information. Several events spanning from 2023 to the present were created. The Teaching and Learning Conference in 2024, the theme was focus on AI. The conference was attended by 157 researchers who came from 13 national universities and 2 international universities, giving our academic environment a good picture of what other institutions are saying and doing about AI. The 2024 Conference theme again had a focus on AI combined with decolonisation. The attendees also ranged from around 150 researchers and participants across South Africa and globally. The themes and topics covered in the two events ranged as per the following excerpts:

Excerpt A: Conference Themes:

-2024 Conference Theme: "AI in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Lessons Learnt and Future Directions."

-2025 Conference Theme: "AI and the Decolonization of the Curriculum: Prospects, Progressive and Retrogressive Practices, and Experiences."

Excerpt B: Guest Speaker Themes:

Topic 2024: "What role can AI play in disciplines and in the broader academic environment?"

Topic 2025: "AI and Bridging the Gap between Global and Local Educational Paradigms"

Excerpts C: Some titles of papers presented:

Title 1: Enhancing Assessment with Generative Artificial Intelligence: The Role of Prompt Engineering.... Author....

Title 2: Ethically Justifiable Uses of AI in Knowledge Development Practices

Title 3: Utilisation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for academic purposes: perspectives from University students

Concurrent to the above event, a series of workshops and webinars were hosted from 2023 - 2025 for the academic environment, inviting guest lectures and speakers from various universities. The workshop topics ranged as per the themes below:

Guest Lecture 1-Topic: Data-Driven Decision Making: Utilizing AI to analyse student data for informed instructional decisions.

Guest Lecture 2-Topic: Ethical Considerations: Addressing the ethical implications and challenges of using AI in Teaching and Learning.

Guest Lecture 3-Topic: AI-Powered Teaching Tools: Exploring AI-driven platforms and tools that can aid in curriculum development, personalized learning, and assessment.

The above excerpts on conference event theme and papers, workshops, and guest lectures suggest personal legitimacy, which posits transitory and idiosyncratic tendencies (Suchman, 1995), as it is more dependent on experts, guest speakers, academics, and champions invited to deliver lectures and keynote addresses on AI usage, benefits, and challenges.

IV. Institutional policies and guidelines

The institutions already had a plagiarism policy that informed academic integrity and ethical use of information, which was approved prior to AI becoming popular and openly used by students and staff. The plagiarism policy is currently not explicit about AI usage. Drawing from the policy document, what is most close to AI usage is the following excerpt A: "Students must include an appropriate declaration in work that they submit indicating that it is their own work. (For a generic template that may be adapted by departments to suit their specific needs, see Annexure B:" The strategic decision by the institution was to conceptualise and formulate an AI guideline for the institution. These are some of the excerpts drawn from the AI Guideline still under development.

Excerpts 5.4-B

Principles

The University recognises that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to enhance teaching, learning, assessment, and research. However,

its use must align with ethical standards and academic integrity. The following general principles guide the responsible and effective use of AI at....

- a) AI needs to be used transparently, ethically, and in alignment with institutional values.
- b) Students and academics need to acknowledge and disclose when AI tools have been used in academic or research work
- c) AI tools should complement and not replace humans.

Excerpts C

Implementation

Specifies how these AI guidelines should be implemented, using procedures to be followed.

- a) Academics should include faculty-specific norms on ethical and responsible use of AI in the learning guides.
- b) AI guidelines should be reviewed and updated regularly to align with technological advancements and educational best practices.
- c) Lectures and students should sign a declaration to acknowledge and disclose how AI tools are used in teaching, learning, and research.

Taken together, the approval of AI guidelines, the shift to declarations and disclosure and the embedding of faculty-level norms indicate procedural and cognitive legitimacy in progress. AI use is being routinised through accepted procedures and is increasingly comprehensible and “taken-for-granted” withing teaching and learning practice (Suchman, 1995).

V. Communities of Practice (CoP)

Building on all the above events and activities the Teaching and Learning Centre sought to create a space where academics can share information and showcase best practices by create a space and bringing together academics who share the same interest in understanding and developing their practice on Artificial Intelligence. This started in the last quarter of 2025 in the form of quarterly round tables. The total number of attendees was an overwhelming 84 participants, which was not anticipated. This platform suggests the dimension of Influence Legitimacy, which posits the co-option and influencing of others to buy into and adopt a particular practice as a legitimate practice. The community of practice was not just to get buying from those you were still not sure of and had a fear of AI, but it is also to support, share, exchange experiences, and evoke interest in understanding ethical and responsible use of AI so that lecturers can inform the students about its best practices in AI usage. The CoP formulation was informed submission of a proposal that conceptualises the purpose and objectives behind the CoP. Below is an excerpt from the Proposal document.

Excerpt A:

Purpose of the Proposal

The primary purpose of this proposal is to seek institutional approval and endorsement for the creation of a.... Community Practice on AI in Higher Education, which will:

- Serve as a collaborative platform for academics to explore, share, and advance ethical AI practices.
- Facilitate the co-creation of a AI Usage Guide that aligns with national and institutional frameworks.
- Build institutional capacity for AI literacy and responsible innovation.

- Identify and evaluate AI tools suitable for diverse academic and research contexts.
- Promote cross-faculty collaboration on AI integration, research, and policy development.

The CoP's cross-faculty participation, focus on ethical practice, and co-creation of guidance function as influence and pragmatic legitimacy mechanisms broadening buy-in while aligning AI practices with staff needs and institutional outcomes. Such peer-led structures are consistent with sector moves towards AI literacy, policy clarity and assessment integrity across SA universities (USAf DELT CoP, 2025; CHE Kagisano, 2024) The insights in this study suggest a dynamic interplay between institutional strategy, engagement with students and staff and the perceived value of AI. The above document analysis indicates a growing awareness of the need for AI guidance, staff and student development initiatives in line with digital transformation priorities, especially within an institution with a strategic renewal agenda informed by digitisation which automatically institutionalises the integration of AI tools in teaching and learning. However, uneven adoption practices across faculties reflect realities highlighted in the literature, particularly infrastructure disparities, ethical concerns and limited capacity.

The study, based on the reviewed literature and findings, identified several critical success factors essential for institutionalising AI in the teaching, learning, and research environment. These factors include:

- An institution-wide awareness process that acknowledges emerging challenges and opportunities.
- Intentional initiatives and programs aimed at building the capacity of both staff and students, equipping them with the skills necessary for the responsible adoption of AI.
- Piloting of AI tools to develop capacity and expertise that can inform policy development.
- The development of policies and guidelines that address academic integrity and the ethical use of AI.

Below is a diagram representing a five-stage process model suggested from the findings for the institutionalisation of a new phenomenon:

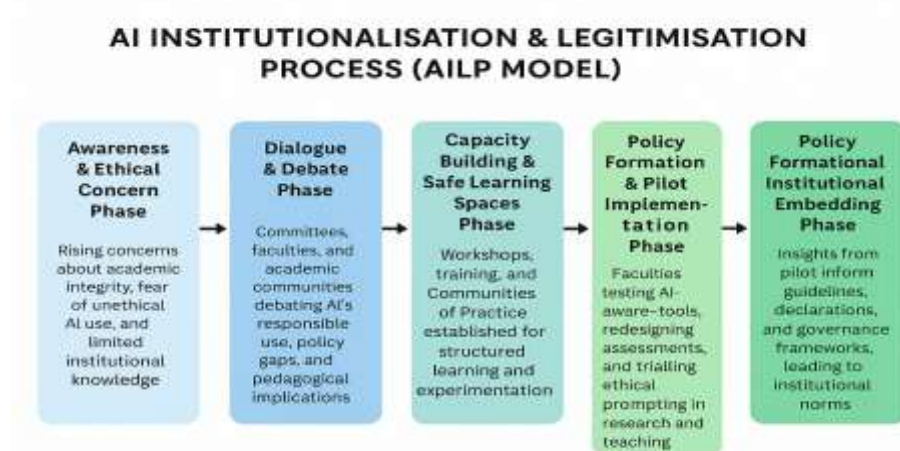


Fig 1: A Findings suggested AILP Model

The diagram above illustrates the process of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into teaching, learning, and research environments. This integration occurred through a progressive, multi-dimensional approach, influenced by ethical considerations, organizational learning, and strategic formalization. Initially, AI entered academic discussions amid anxiety and uncertainty following incidents of AI-assisted student submissions in early 2022 and 2023. Concerns focused on academic integrity, ethical usage, and the limited knowledge among staff. This atmosphere of anxiety compelled the institution to address the ethical implications of AI and the need for responsible governance. As committees and faculty boards engaged in discussions and debates, the institution transitioned into a phase of pragmatic legitimacy. During this phase, it prioritized practical capacity-building initiatives, staff development programs, and student awareness campaigns to equip the academic community with the skills necessary to navigate AI responsibly and effectively. Over time, structured initiatives such as workshops, Communities of Practice, pilot projects, and AI-aware assessment redesign fostered an environment of experimentation and shared understanding. This iterative engagement allowed the institution to gather practical evidence, clarify expectations, and deepen collective knowledge.

These sustained efforts led to the establishment of cognitive legitimacy, where AI became a fundamental aspect of the teaching, learning, and research ecosystem. The development of institutional guidelines, ethical frameworks, integrity declarations, and operational planning indicators marked the final stage of embedding AI within the institution. At this stage, AI is normalized, governed, and strategically aligned with institutional priorities. The resulting AI Institutionalization and Legitimation Process (AILP) Model exemplifies the journey from initial concerns to dialogue, capacity building, experimentation, and policy formulation. Together, these stages emphasize critical success factors for meaningful AI integration, including early awareness, ethical clarity, structured capacity building, and the creation of supportive environments for learning and innovation. These findings aim to enhance understanding of how universities navigate organizational change in response to technological advancements. The paper provides insights into digital transformation relevant to both the South African higher education landscape and the global higher education context.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study critically examines the institutionalization of AI at a South African university, situating the analysis within broader discussions on educational innovation, institutional theory, and technological change. The findings indicate a progressive process of legitimation, where initial feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and concerns about integrity lead to constructive dialogue. These discussions evolve into structured learning environments, experimentation with various tools, and eventually, the establishment of formal governance structures. This journey demonstrates how AI transforms from a contested and unfamiliar concept into an institutionalized practice embedded in policy, pedagogy, and professional development. The study concludes that institutionalizing AI is not a one-time event but a developmental process that requires ethical foresight, organizational responsiveness, and intentional strategy. As AI continues to evolve, institutions that adopt this cyclical and reflective approach will be better positioned to leverage its benefits.

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