
User Acceptance of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Integrating Ethical Principles and Trust into the Theory of Planned Behaviour

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A B S T R A C T

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly adopted in higher education to enhance teaching, learning, and administrative processes. While AI-driven systems offer significant potential benefits, their adoption in educational contexts raises critical ethical concerns that influence user trust and acceptance. Issues related to data privacy, fairness, transparency, accountability, and system reliability have emerged as key barriers to the responsible use of AI, particularly in developing-country higher education systems where institutional governance and ethical readiness remain limited. Existing technology acceptance models often regard AI as a neutral tool and fail to adequately address how ethical considerations influence behavioural intentions and actual usage. This paper introduces a conceptual framework for understanding ethical AI acceptance in higher education by combining ethical principles, trust, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The framework conceptualises four ethical principles: Privacy and Security, Fairness and Non-Discrimination, Transparency and Accountability, and Technical Integrity and Robustness as antecedents that influence trust in AI systems. Trust is posited as a central mediating mechanism influencing users' behavioural intention and subsequent AI use. This study extends the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by incorporating ethical principles into AI decision-making. It shows that adopting AI in higher education is influenced by social values and ethics. The proposed framework offers theoretical insights into the role of ethics and trust in technology acceptance and provides practical guidance for universities and policymakers seeking to implement AI responsibly. Future research is encouraged to empirically validate the framework across diverse institutional and cultural contexts to support ethical and socially cohesive digital transformation in higher education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Ethical AI, Trust, Theory of Planned Behaviour, User Acceptance.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing higher education by enabling personalised learning, intelligent tutoring, automated assessments, and data-driven decision-making, positioning it as a central driver of digital transformation in universities worldwide (George & Wooden, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Yet its adoption is not merely a technical matter: because AI increasingly shapes assessment, progression, and institutional decision-making, it raises ethical concerns around data privacy, algorithmic bias, and a lack of transparency and accountability that directly influence how users perceive, trust, and accept these systems (Nguyen et al., 2023; Wickramasinghe et al., 2026). These concerns are magnified in developing-country contexts, including Sri Lanka, where governance structures, regulation, and institutional readiness for AI remain limited (Henadirage & Gunarathne, 2025), and where the resulting uncertainty can directly affect academic performance, assessment integrity, and trust in institutions.

Established technology acceptance models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) explain adoption largely through perceived usefulness and ease of use, treating technology as ethically neutral (Davis, 1992; Venkatesh et al., 2003). This leaves them ill-equipped to explain AI adoption in contexts where ethical considerations, rather than functional performance alone, influence whether users accept a system. A growing body of research underscores the importance of ethics in AI adoption in education, but this work remains concentrated at the level of guidelines and policy, offering limited insight into how individual ethical perceptions translate into user behaviour (Karran et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). While trust is known to be essential in human-AI interactions (Lee & See, 2004), its role in connecting ethical perceptions to behavioural outcomes is still not well understood in existing models.

This gap raises a main research question: how do users' ethical perceptions of AI influence their trust in, and ultimately their behavioural intention to use, AI tools in higher education? To address it, this study proposes a conceptual framework that extends the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by incorporating ethical principles as perceived system attributes and trust as the mediating mechanism linking those perceptions to behavioural intention. This framework aims to offer a better understanding of AI acceptance in higher education by considering moral, social, and psychological factors, rather than just focusing on technology itself.

2. Literature Review

2.1. AI in Higher Education

The adoption of AI in higher education has accelerated as universities pursue digital transformation initiatives aimed at improving teaching quality, learning personalisation, and administrative efficiency (Martínez-Pérez & Rodríguez-Abitia, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). AI applications in higher education include intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading and feedback tools, learning analytics, predictive student support systems, and AI-assisted administrative decision making (George & Wooden, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). These technologies are increasingly embedded in core academic processes, positioning AI as an influential actor in shaping educational outcomes. Despite its potential benefits, the integration of AI into higher education introduces ethical risks that distinguish educational AI from AI applications in purely commercial or industrial contexts. Educational AI often influence assessment, progression, and academic decision-making, creating long-term consequences for students and educators (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). As a result, ethical

concerns are not peripheral but central to how AI systems are perceived, trusted, and accepted within universities.

2.2. Ethical AI in Higher Education

AI systems in higher education rely heavily on data-driven and automated decision-making processes. These characteristics raise ethical concerns related to data protection, fairness, accountability, and transparency (Nguyen et al., 2023; Wickramasinghe et al., 2026). Educational AI systems process sensitive personal data, including learning behaviours, assessment records, and demographic information, often without transparent consent mechanisms (Casas-Roma et al., 2021). Ethical lapses in data governance can undermine users' confidence and erode institutional trust. Empirical and conceptual studies highlight that ethical lapses such as biased algorithmic outputs, opaque decision-making processes, and inadequate data protection can undermine user confidence and institutional legitimacy (Adadi & Berrada, 2018; Wickramasinghe et al., 2026). These concerns are amplified in developing country contexts where regulatory frameworks, ethical oversight mechanisms, and institutional readiness for AI governance may be limited (Henadirage & Gunarathne, 2025; Mannuru et al., 2023). Without ethical safeguards, AI adoption risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than supporting inclusive digital transformation.

2.3. Normative Theories of Ethics and AI Adoption

Normative Theories of Ethics (NTE) provide the philosophical foundation for understanding why ethical principles are essential in AI adoption, and each of the principles adopted in this study can be traced to a specific normative tradition. Deontological ethics emphasise duties toward individuals, such as respecting privacy and ensuring fairness, while consequentialist perspectives focus on minimizing harm and maximizing educational benefits (Boddington, 2023). These ethical traditions underpin global AI ethics frameworks and justify the inclusion of ethical principles as central determinants of acceptable AI use in higher education (UNESCO, 2022). These ethical traditions underpin global AI ethics frameworks and inform principles promoted by international and regional bodies (European Commission & Directorate-General for Communications Network, 2019; Ferrario & Loi, 2022). However, existing normative and policy-level frameworks stop at the level of institutional obligation: they do not explain how a user's judgement that a system is failing a duty, or producing harmful outcomes, translates into reduced trust and weaker behavioural intention to use those tools. By linking each principle to its normative grounding and then treating that principle as a perceived attribute feeding into trust, this study extends normative ethical reasoning into a testable behavioural pathway connecting philosophical justification directly to user acceptance rather than leaving it at a general philosophical level.

2.4. Identification of Ethical Principles Relevant to AI Acceptance

Building on existing AI ethics literature and educational AI research, four ethical principles are identified as particularly salient for AI adoption in higher education: Privacy and Security, Fairness and Non-Discrimination, Transparency and Accountability, and Technical Integrity and Robustness (Cubukcu & Aktürk, 2020; Karran et al., 2024; Lee & See, 2004; UNESCO, 2022). Privacy and Security reflect users' perceptions that AI systems adequately protect personal and institutional data from unauthorised access or misuse (Mannuru et al., 2023). Fairness and Non-Discrimination address concerns related to algorithmic bias and equitable treatment of diverse user groups, particularly in assessment and profiling processes (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Transparency and Accountability refer to the visibility of AI decision-making processes and the clarity of responsibility when system errors or adverse outcomes occur (Davis, 1992; Wang et al., 2024). Technical Integrity and Robustness relate to system

reliability, accuracy, and consistent performance, which are critical for sustaining trust in resource-constrained educational environments (Karran et al., 2024).

Rather than being treated as abstract policy ideals, these ethical principles are conceptualised as perceived attributes of the system that directly influence users' trust and acceptance of AI technologies in higher education. Frameworks such as UNESCO's 2022 AI Ethics Recommendation and the European Commission's 2023 guidelines outline ethical principles as institutional obligations for developers and universities, typically addressed through governance, auditing, and compliance mechanisms. Users of AI systems, however, typically do not engage directly with these documents. Instead, they form judgements based on their personal experiences with the system, such as data protection, fairness of outcomes, explainability of decisions, and system reliability. This study treats these ethical principles not as compliance criteria but as perceived system attributes: users' subjective judgement of privacy, fairness, transparency, and technical integrity, irrespective of formal certification. It is this perception, rather than the underlying policy, that influences trust and subsequently, the behavioural intention to use AI in higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a conceptual research design based on an integrative literature review to create a framework for understanding user acceptance of AI in higher education. Conceptual and integrative reviews are ideal for emerging and fragmented fields, as they combine various theoretical insights to generate new ideas (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Instead of focusing on empirical generalisations, this approach emphasises theory development through critical analysis and synthesis of existing knowledge. Recent studies highlight that structured literature reviews can effectively advance theory and uncover research gaps, especially in interdisciplinary areas like AI adoption (Snyder, 2019, 2024). Given the interplay of ethical, technical, and behavioural aspects in AI use in higher education, this integrative approach is well-suited for creating a comprehensive explanatory model.

3.2. Literature Selection Strategy

To ensure methodological rigour and transparency, the study followed a structured, four-stage literature selection process based on the PRISMA framework, adapted for integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic review of empirical studies alone.

Identification: records were identified by searching four major databases, ScienceDirect, Taylor and Francis, Emerald, and SAGE; chosen for their combined coverage of technology and education/behavioural research relevant to this study; discipline-specific and regional databases were not searched separately, as their content is largely captured through these four. The search used terms such as "Artificial Intelligence in higher education," "AI ethics," "Trust in AI," "technology acceptance," and "Theory of Planned Behaviour." This search returned 29,945 records.

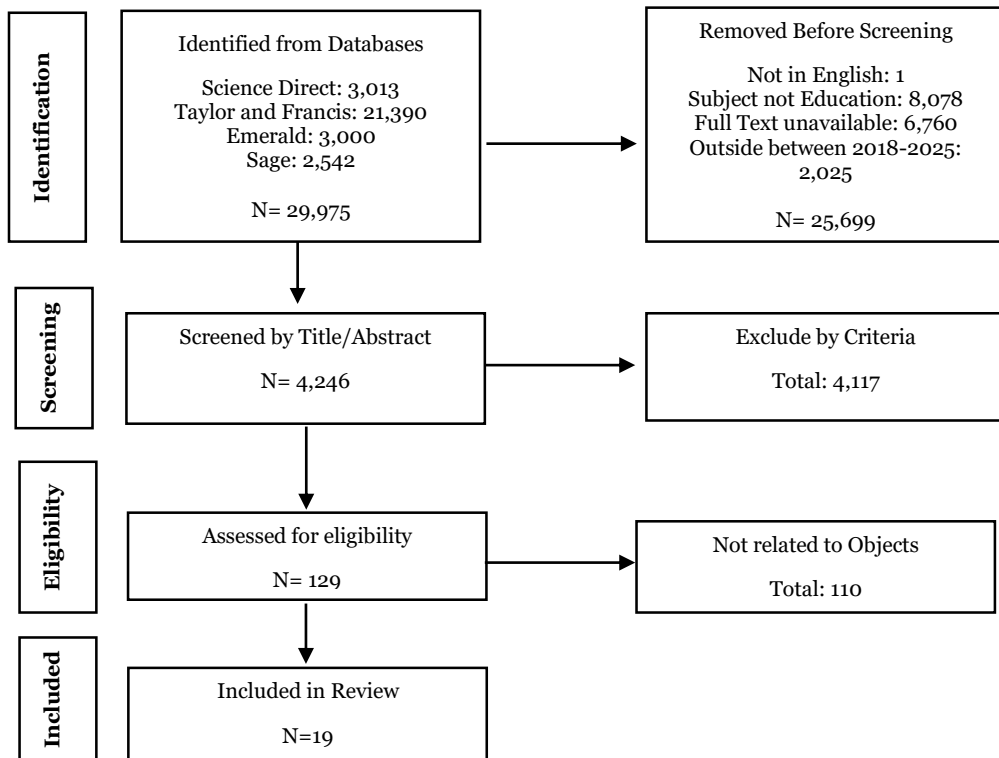
Screening: records were filtered by language (English only), Subject area (Education), full-text availability, and publication year (2018-2025), removing 25,699 records and leaving 4,246 for title and abstract screening.

Eligibility: The 4,246 records were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria below, removing 4,117 and leaving 129 full-text articles assessed for eligibility.

Included: Full-text review excluded a further 110 studies that were not related to the study's objectives, leaving 19 articles retained for synthesis.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus on AI Ethics, trust in AI, or technology acceptance	No focus on these constructs
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Non-peer-reviewed sources, editorials
Published 2018-2025	Outdated
English Language	Non-English
Relevant to higher education	Narrow technical domains with no bearing on user acceptance or ethics

**Figure 1: PRISMA Model**

3.3. Theoretical Foundation and Construct Identification

The conceptual framework is developed through the integration of three complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively explain behavioural intention in AI contexts. The TPB provides the core behavioural structure by explaining how attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence intention and behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Trust in Automation Theory extends this perspective by explaining how users develop trust in automated systems based on perceptions of reliability, predictability, and alignment with expectations, which in turn guides users' reliance on such systems. In addition, AI ethics frameworks offer normative guidance by identifying key principles such as privacy, fairness, transparency, and accountability that underpin responsible AI use (Nguyen et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022). These ethical principles are widely recognised across recent literature as

foundational requirements for trustworthy AI systems and play a critical role in shaping user perceptions and acceptance of AI technologies.

Based on a review of recent literature on AI ethics and education, four key ethical principles emerged as especially important in higher education: privacy and security, fairness and non-discrimination, transparency and accountability, and Technical integrity and robustness (Wickramasinghe et al., 2026). These principles were chosen because they frequently appear in studies and are directly relevant to how AI systems affect academic outcomes and decision-making in educational settings. The methods used to identify these concepts involve comparing and synthesising various studies to create clear theoretical ideas (Snyder, 2019; Torracco, 2005).

3.4. Framework Development Process

The conceptual framework was developed through a structured process to ensure clarity and thorough analysis. Integrative reviews are useful for building theories because they help researchers combine scattered knowledge and connect different ideas (Snyder, 2024; Torracco, 2005). In this study, ethical principles from the literature were viewed as qualities that users can recognise in a system, rather than just abstract policies. This approach allowed these ethical qualities to be included in a behavioural model. The study then connected these qualities to how trust is built, based on Trust in Automation Theory, which states that users are more likely to trust a system that shows reliability, fairness, and accountability (European Commission, 2023; Lee & See, 2004; UNESCO, 2022).

Trust was added to the TPB as a key factor that affects attitudes, social norms, and perceived control over behaviour. Previous research shows that trust is crucial in shaping how users perceive and evaluate technology, impacting their attitudes and feelings of control when using it (Al-Mamary & Alshammari, 2026; Gefen et al., 2003; Suryadi et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). In contexts like AI systems, trust is especially important because of the uncertainty involved. By including trust in TPB, the model was enhanced to explain how users' confidence in a system affects their intentions. This integration creates a way to understand how ethical perceptions influence behaviour through the development of trust.

Trust is positioned as a mediator, rather than a direct antecedent or moderator. First, Trust in Automation Theory posits trust as a cognitive-affective mechanism linking perceived system characteristics, such as fairness and transparency, to a disposition to rely on a system (Lee & See, 2004). Trust is viewed as a pathway connecting perception to reliance, rather than merely correlating with it. Second, the TPB considers attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control as proximal, belief-driven determinants of intention, with external variables influencing intention only indirectly, through their effect on these beliefs (Ajzen, 1991).

In this framework, behavioural intention is seen as the main predictor of actual AI usage, in line with the TPB, which states that intention is the closest factor to determining behaviour. This approach builds on previous research that has added new elements to TPB for technology adoption without changing its core principles. Therefore, this proposed framework is based on solid theoretical foundations and logically extends established behavioural theory, rather than just combining various factors (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

To improve the rigour and credibility of the conceptual framework, several strategies were used: First, it incorporates multiple well-established theories for stronger support. Second, all constructs are backed by prior research to ensure their validity. Third, the relationships between these constructs are based on established theories, which avoid speculation. Finally,

the development process of the framework is clearly outlined to enhance transparency and replicability.

While prior research has extended TAM and UTAUT to incorporate trust, for example, by adding trust as a direct antecedent of perceived usefulness and behavioural intention (Al-Mamary & Alshammari, 2026; Suryadi et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), these extensions treat as a standalone determinant alongside performance-based constructs, without connecting it to the ethical perceptions that influence it in the first place. Conversely, AI ethics frameworks such as those proposed by UNESCO, (2022) and European Commission, (2023) articulate ethical principles as policy-level guidelines for institutions and developers, but stop short of modelling how individual users perceive and act on these principles. The proposed framework differs by treating ethical principles as system attributes influencing trust, positioning trust as the direct mediator in the TPB model. This approach is particularly suitable for higher education, where AI impacts high-stakes academic outcomes, users have limited autonomy, and regulatory safeguards are often underdeveloped. Here, ethical perceptions are a primary channel for trust formation and acceptance, surpassing the capabilities of generic technology-acceptance models.

Research methods highlight that rigorous literature-based studies need careful selection, critical analysis, and clear communication of theoretical insights (Snyder, 2019). Conceptual studies that use these structures are valued for their ability to clarify concepts, identify relationships, and enhance theoretical understanding. Therefore, the proposed framework lays a strong foundation for future empirical testing and adds to the research on ethical AI acceptance in higher education.

4. Result: Proposed Conceptual Framework

4.1. Ethical Principles as Determinants of Trust

As established in the Literature Review, the same four ethical principles: Privacy and Security, Fairness and Non-Discrimination, Transparency and Accountability, and Technical Integrity and Robustness, anchor the proposed framework as antecedents of trust in AI (Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2025; Henadirage & Gunarathne, 2025; Wickramasinghe et al., 2026). Within the framework, each principle operates as a perceived system attribute: users who perceive an AI system as adequately protecting their data, treating them fairly, operating transparently, and performing reliably are more likely to trust that system, which in turn influences their behavioural intentions to use it.

4.2. Trust in AI and the Theory of Planned Behaviour

Trust in Automation Theory explains how users decide whether to rely on automated systems based on perceptions of reliability, predictability, and alignment with user expectations (Lee & See, 2004). In higher education, trust in AI encompasses not only technical performance but also moral judgements regarding ethical alignment and institutional intent. To explain how ethical perceptions influence behaviour, this study integrates trust with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). TPB posits that behaviour is predicted by behavioural intention, which is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Trust is theorised to form TPB components by influencing their ability to use AI responsibly (Xu et al., 2016). By positioning trust as a mediating mechanism between ethical principles and TPB constructs, the framework addresses limitations of traditional acceptance models that overlook ethical dimensions of AI use.

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework. The proposed framework is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and extends it without altering its core principles. In

TPB, behaviour is driven by behavioural intention, which is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Background factors influence behaviour indirectly through these belief-based constructs. The new framework maintains behavioural intention as the key factor leading to actual AI use, following the established pathway from intention to behaviour outlined in TPB.

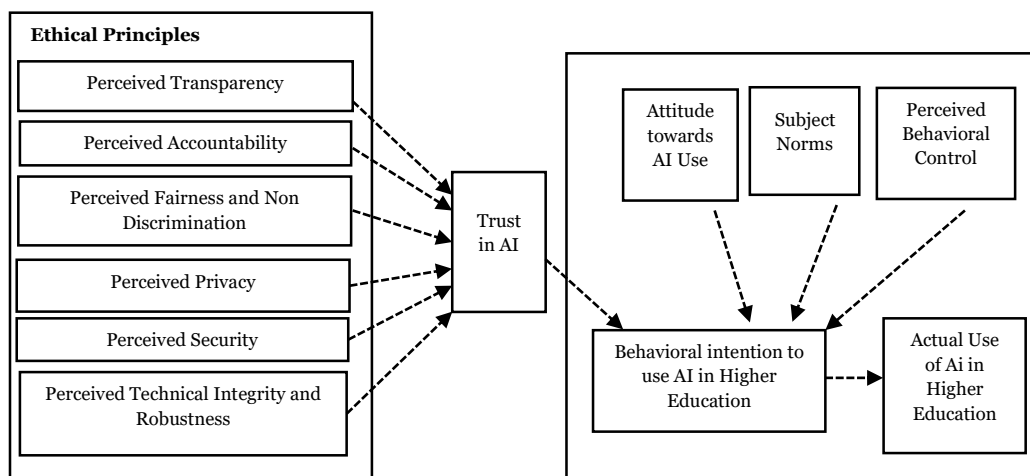


Figure 2: Proposed Conceptual Framework

The framework integrates ethical principles and trust into the TPB to better explain how users decide to use AI systems. In this model, ethical principles influence how users evaluate AI, while trust influences their intention to use AI. Trust is considered an important factor influencing users' confidence in the ethical and reliable functioning of AI, without altering the fundamental ideas of TPB. In contexts like AI in higher education, trust plays a crucial role in impacting users' intentions. This framework preserves the original TPB idea that intention leads to behaviour while enhancing its relevance in contexts where ethics and trust are important.

4.3 Proposed Propositions

- P1: Perceived Transparency positively influences trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P2: Perceived Accountability positively influences trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P3: Perceived Privacy positively influences trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P4: Perceived Security positively influences trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P5: Perceived Fairness and Non-Discrimination positively influences trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P6: Perceived Technical integrity and robustness positively influence trust in AI tools in Higher Education.
- P7: Trust in AI positively influences behavioural intention to use AI in higher education.
- P8: Attitude toward using AI positively influences behavioural to use AI in higher education.
- P9: Subjective norms positively influence behavioural to use AI in higher education.
- P10: Perceived behavioural control positively influences behavioural to use AI in higher education.

P11: Behavioural intention to use AI positively predicts actual use of AI in higher education.

P12: Trust in AI mediates the relationship between ethical principles and behavioural intention to use AI in higher education.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The proposed framework contributes to theory by extending the TPB to ethically sensitive AI contexts. By integrating ethical principles and trust into the behavioural pathway, the framework addresses limitations of traditional technology acceptance models that overlook moral and institutional dimensions of AI use. The framework positions ethics as a core behavioural determinant rather than an external or secondary concern. From a practical perspective, the framework provides guidance to higher education institutions on the implementation of AI technologies. Universities can use the framework to inform AI selection, system design, and capacity-building initiatives by prioritising ethical alignment. Strengthening privacy protections, fairness, transparency, accountability, and technical reliability can enhance trust and increase user acceptance of AI systems among students and academic staff. At the policy level, the framework supports the development of context-sensitive AI governance strategies, particularly in developing-country settings. By emphasizing ethical alignment and trust, the framework contributes to institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and responsible digital transformation. Policymakers and regulators can use the framework to align AI adoption with broader educational and societal values.

This paper presents a conceptual framework explaining ethical AI acceptance in higher education by integrating ethical principles, trust, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour. By framing ethics as a behavioural determinant rather than an external constraint, the framework highlights the value-laden and socially embedded nature of AI adoption in academic environments. This study has limitations in several areas. Firstly, the framework is conceptual and untested empirically; propositions require validation via quantitative methods before firm conclusions can be drawn. Secondly, while six ethical principles were chosen based on literature, they may not be exhaustive; other dimensions like explainability or human oversight could be explored in future research. Furthermore, the framework is tailored to developing country contexts, such as Sri Lanka, and may require adjustment for institutions with mature AI governance structures. Next, the framework doesn't account for individual moderators like prior AI experience, digital literacy, or disciplinary background, which influence the relationships between ethical perceptions, trust and behavioural intentions. Future research should focus on empirical validation of the propositions across diverse contexts, using both students and academic staff, and conduct comparative studies across countries with varying AI governance maturity. Longitudinal research is also essential to understand how ethical priorities and trust evolve as AI tools become more integrated in higher education, and future studies should test the moderating role of factors like digital literacy, disciplinary background, and prior experience on the ethics-trust-intention pathway.

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