

# **When Policy Lags Behind Technology: Student Experiences of AI Governance and Inequality in Higher Education**

## **Research Overview**

This qualitative study examines how university students experience artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education through lenses of governance, inequality, and student voice. Drawing on interviews with undergraduate students in Türkiye, it shows AI use is shaped not only by learning needs but also by institutional ambiguity, unequal access, and decision-making.

## **Purpose of Study**

Artificial intelligence has rapidly entered higher education, yet institutional responses often lag behind students' everyday use of AI tools. Existing research has largely focused on AI adoption, attitudes, and instructional applications, while less attention has been paid to how students experience AI as a governance issue shaped by institutional silence, unequal access, ethical ambiguity, and limited participation in policy processes, particularly in centrally governed systems where policy signals indirectly shape students' opportunities to benefit from digital technologies.

This study examines how undergraduate students in Turkish higher education interpret AI use within their academic lives, focusing on equity, access, institutional guidance, ethical boundaries, and representation. It asks how students from diverse backgrounds engage with AI tools; how they perceive fairness, access, and privilege; to what extent they perceive institutional support, guidance, or restriction; how they evaluate ethical boundaries; and whether they see themselves as represented in institutional decision-making processes. The study is guided by a multi-layered conceptual frame combining social justice, AI ethics governance, and equity literacy, conceptualizing AI as a sociotechnical phenomenon shaped by institutional conditions and differential capacities to benefit from its use, while linking

local higher education experiences to broader global transformations in educational technology. In this respect, the study contributes to global debates on how higher education institutions can respond to AI while addressing context-specific inequalities.

## **Research Methods**

The study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design based on semi-structured interviews with 22 undergraduate students from different universities in Türkiye, selected to reflect variation in academic background and access conditions. Data were analyzed using abductive thematic analysis, combining theory-informed coding with iterative refinement. Two researchers developed a shared coding framework to ensure consistency, focusing on how students interpret AI within institutional contexts and how structural conditions shape their experiences of access, fairness, and participation.

## **Results and Discussion**

Findings show that students experience AI not simply as a technical aid, but as a layered educational reality shaped by cognitive, emotional, ethical, and institutional dynamics. AI functions as a tool for cognitive structuring, explanation, and academic support, becoming embedded in students' learning processes as an interactive partner used for summarizing, clarifying concepts, generating questions, and refining writing. However, this engagement is inherently ambivalent; alongside efficiency and support, students report dependence, discomfort, and a sense of alienation, suggesting that AI reshapes relationships with knowledge, authorship, and academic selfhood in complex ways.

At the same time, access to AI is unevenly distributed, with inequalities emerging not only from economic and infrastructural constraints but also from differences in digital literacy and the ability to use AI strategically. Premium tools are often financially inaccessible, while institutional support remains limited or invisible, indicating a shift from access-based divides

to capacity-based inequalities, where students differ in their ability to benefit meaningfully from AI.

Students also actively negotiate ethical boundaries of AI use, raising concerns about fairness, authorship, and unequal academic outcomes. They distinguish between acceptable uses such as idea generation and editing, and problematic uses such as uncritical text generation, while emphasizing that ethical AI use cannot be reduced to individual responsibility alone. Instead, students call for clearer pedagogical guidance and shared institutional norms, positioning ethical engagement with AI as both a personal and institutional concern.

Most centrally, students experience AI governance in higher education as fragmented, ambiguous, and largely invisible. Institutional responses are often limited to minimal guidance, inconsistent practices, or surveillance-oriented tools, generating uncertainty and mistrust. Students report exclusion from decision-making processes despite being primary users, revealing a persistent gap between institutional regulation and student experience in which policy absence itself functions as an indirect form of governance.

Taken together, these findings position AI not only as a pedagogical tool but as a governance and equity issue. When policy lags behind technological change, students navigate AI through uneven and uncertain conditions, producing tensions between opportunity and fairness, and between institutional control and student agency. Two key implications follow: universities need transparent and context-sensitive AI frameworks that move beyond silence and surveillance toward pedagogical clarity, and students should be recognized as legitimate participants in shaping AI governance through more inclusive and dialogic decision-making processes.

## **Keywords**

artificial intelligence; higher education; AI governance; inequality; student voice