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Leadership for a Sustainable Tomorrow

Reimagining Chartered Accountancy
Education in South Africa

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Keywords

Accounting education, citizenship, critical pedagogy, curriculum transformation, ethical leadership, Global South, responsible leadership, social justice, sustainable business.

Abstract

Chartered Accountants (CAs) dominate corporate leadership roles in South Africa and hold the capacity to shape economic and social outcomes. South Africa still experiences socio-economic inequality, and in recent corporate governance failures, CAs were involved in decision-making capacity. Given this context, this conceptual study considers the question: *How can Chartered Accountant education be reimagined to develop ethically grounded, socially responsible professionals who are equipped to make consequence-aware decisions and to contribute to sustainable value creation and business resilience?* Drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and critical consciousness (Freire 1996), Michel Foucault's analysis of knowledge and power (Foucault 1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1990, 1995), Carlos Torres's global citizenship education (Torres 2017), and Yusef Waghid's *ubuntu*-inspired deliberative democratic education (Waghid 2018), the article develops an integrated theoretical framework for cultivating a consciousness of socially responsible decision-making within a BCom in Accounting. Using a conceptual-theoretical, qualitative approach, the framework is illustrated through selected examples from the design of a newly developed three-year BCom in Accounting curriculum, including an intentional strategy-and-leadership theme spanning the degree and the integration of professional attributes and values across other delivery themes. The main argument is that accounting education should move beyond a technocratic focus to become a pedagogical site for human transformation, ethical citizenship, and social justice-oriented professional formation.

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1. Introduction

In South Africa's unequal socio-economic landscape, where Chartered Accountants (CAs) occupy a disproportionate number of corporate leadership roles, there is an urgent need to rethink how accounting education cultivates ethical, socially conscious graduates. The education of future CAs must evolve beyond technical competence to foster human transformation and ethical citizenship. This conceptual study proposes a theoretical framework for cultivating a socially responsible decision-making consciousness in graduates of the Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting (BCom).

The primary research question for this paper is: *How can Chartered Accountant education be reimagined to develop ethically grounded, socially responsible professionals who are equipped to make consequence-aware decisions and to contribute to sustainable value creation and business resilience?* To explore this, we develop a theoretical framework that combines Paulo Freire's (1996) critical pedagogy, particularly his notions of critical consciousness, with insights from Michel Foucault's (1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1990, 1995) analysis of knowledge and power, Carlos Torres's (2017) work on global citizenship education, and Yusef Waghid's (2018) notion of *ubuntu*-inspired deliberative democratic education in the African context. These scholars collectively inform an approach to curriculum and pedagogy that aligns with the university's original mission of critical thinking and ethical responsibility (Giroux 2015). By adopting a conceptual-theoretical, qualitative approach, this research presents selected examples from the design of a newly developed BCom in Accounting, showing how a theoretically informed framework can be operationalised in practice to foster ethically conscious and socially responsible accounting graduates.

The novel approach to curriculum design and development led to the adoption of an intentional strategy and leadership delivery theme spanning the three years, as well as to weaving professional attributes and values pervasively throughout the other delivery themes. This resulted not only in scaffolding of technical knowledge across the degree but also in scaffolding of personal and professional development. While the conceptual paper does not yet present empirical findings, it outlines a future research design that involves document

analysis and interviews with curriculum designers, lecturers, and student focus groups.

This conceptual contribution advances the discourse on professional business education by offering a theoretical framework for integrating citizenship and social justice into professional degree programmes. It challenges the traditional, narrow technocratic framing of accounting education and repositions it as a possible site for a richer and nuanced socially responsible business leader and citizen. The theoretical framework is intended not only for curriculum redesign in South Africa but also for broader application in Global South contexts seeking to align professional education with democratic, socially just futures.

2. Context

*We believe we can enable people to become more than they dared imagine,
unlocking their potential to help shape our collective future.*

Milpark Education (2025)

Grounded in the belief that education has the power to expand both individual capability and collective possibility, our educational philosophy views learning as a transformative, rather than merely instrumental, process. It is from this belief as a foundation that we approached the conceptualisation of a new BCom in Accounting qualification.

South Africa’s professional accounting sector is situated within a socio-economic context marked by persistent structural inequality, raising critical questions about the purposes and assumptions underpinning accounting education. Despite the political transition of the mid-1990s, economic disparities remain deeply entrenched. The World Bank (2022) identifies the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) region as the most unequal globally, with South Africa exhibiting the highest Gini coefficient, a standard measure of inequality where higher values indicate greater income disparity. These inequalities are reproduced in labour market outcomes: in the second quarter of 2024, unemployment among

Black/African South Africans stood at 37.6%, compared to substantially lower rates for other population groups (Statista 2024). Such conditions demand professional leadership that is ethically grounded and socially responsive.

CAs occupy positions of disproportionate economic and organisational influence within this context (Terblanche/Waghid 2021). They dominate senior leadership roles in South Africa's corporate sector, including Chief Financial Officer and Chief Executive positions within major JSE-listed companies (SAICA 2025a). This concentration of professional authority suggests that accounting is not merely a technical practice but a socially consequential one. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) defines CAs as "responsible leaders who behave ethically and create sustainable value for a wide range of stakeholders within an organisation" (SAICA 2025b). It requires integrating technical accounting expertise with professional values, sound judgement, and ethical conduct to maintain public trust and professional legitimacy. By delivering high-quality outputs and making sound decisions, CAs influence organisational value creation by promoting sustainable economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

However, repeated corporate governance failures involving entities such as Eskom, Transnet, Steinhoff, and KPMG South Africa have called into question the profession's ethical orientation and social accountability (Oben 2021). These events point to a credibility gap between the power that accounting professionals exercise and the ethical capacities expected of them.

Critically, this gap cannot be understood solely as a failure of individual conduct. International scholarship locates the problem within the broader higher education context, where accounting curricula are increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics (Martin-Sardesai/Guthrie/Parker 2021) that privilege market relevance, professional accreditation, and employability outcomes (Yates/Mahameed 2023). Such orientations tend to narrow curricula, marginalising ethical deliberation, critical reflexivity, and engagement with social complexity. South African scholars similarly

highlight how technically focused curricula (Terblanche 2019), limited community-engaged pedagogies (Musundwa 2022), and the alienation that many Black accounting students experience constrain the development of ethical judgment and social responsibility (Musundwa/Hammond 2024).

This analysis of South African and international scholarly research suggests a misalignment between the social power of accounting professionals and the educational frameworks that shape their formation. Addressing this misalignment requires a reorientation of accounting education towards pedagogical approaches that foreground relationality, ethical responsiveness, and social justice. In this regard, we believe that educational philosophers such as Freire, Foucault, Torres and Waghid offer a theoretically grounded lens through which accounting education in South Africa can be reimagined as a practice oriented not only towards technical competence, but towards equality, responsibility, and the common good. Next, we will explore the philosophical underpinnings of these scholars.

3. Theoretical framework

In considering Milpark Education’s mission statement and perspective on learning and teaching, our point of departure is the philosophical underpinnings of two educational philosophers: Paulo Freire, known for developing critical pedagogy, whose seminal thoughts were captured in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; and Michel Foucault, known for his theory of knowledge and power. In order to consider our context, that of a South African higher education institution situated on the African continent and an accounting qualification aligned with the South African accounting professional landscape, we explored the work of Carlos Torres and the notion of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), and that of Yusef Waghid’s *ubuntu*-inspired pedagogy.

Freire

Freire is known for a few concepts that form part of the theory of critical pedagogy, namely ‘conscientization’, ‘emancipation’, and ‘dialogical

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pedagogy'. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) distinguishes between two fundamentally contrasting approaches to education: the banking model and the dialogical model. The banking approach (Freire 1996) conceptualises education as a one-directional process in which learners are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge transmitted by educators, rather than as active participants in the construction of their own learning. In such instances, there is a significant risk of educators becoming mere technicians of learning and students becoming mere knowledge technicians that "shut[s] down students' critically reflective abilities as well as their curiosity, imaginative capacities, and creative ingenuity" (Silverman 2022: 66).

Contrary to this, with a dialogical approach (Freire 1996) which is participatory in nature, the student brings their lived experience and knowledge into conversation with the teacher's. In conversation with one another, the potential of 'conscientization', that of reading the personal, socio-political and economic elements of the contextual world (Boyd 2016), becomes possible. For Freire, problem-solving-focused education is of profound value, more than mere technical knowledge, precisely because students should become socio-politically and economically emancipated. Using social, political, economic, and lived realities as a reflective surface in the educational space fosters a freedom of thought for autonomous decision-making (Vlieghe 2018). Students must consider their worlds, the power structures within them, and their positionality in relation to both.

For meaningful dialogue, with the self and with the other, to happen, a culture or community of learning needs to be fostered amidst diverse viewpoints and cultural lenses. "Dialogue is not simply a teaching technique, but also a process essential to the nature of human beings. We come to know the world and ourselves in and through our interaction with others; knowledge is created in the dialogical encounter" (Boyd 2016: 178). Almost as if, through reflection with one another, teachers and students come to a deeper understanding of who they are and whom they are becoming.

Foucault

Foucault conceptualises power and knowledge as inseparable, co-constitutive forces that shape social life, institutions, and individual subjectivities

(Foucault 1977; 1980a; 1980b). Knowledge is never neutral or independent; it is always produced within networks of power that determine what is accepted as truth in particular historical and social contexts. As such, the exercise of power produces knowledge, establishing norms, discourses, and domains of truth that regulate both social practices and individual behaviours (Foucault 1990; 1995).

Power, in Foucault’s view, is diffuse and relational, operating through strategies embedded in everyday interactions, institutions, and societal networks, rather than being concentrated solely in a single actor or institution (Mills 2003; Van der Walt 2010). Individuals are not passive recipients of power; they are active participants who internalise and reproduce the norms and knowledge systems to which they are exposed, while simultaneously having the capacity to resist and challenge these structures (Foucault 1990; Mills 2003).

This supports Freirean thought about the importance of education for critical reflexivity and an understanding of the world and one’s positionality within it for socio-economic and political emancipation. Foucault’s genealogy method of analysis reveals the contingent and historically situated conditions under which particular forms of knowledge emerge and are legitimised, highlighting whose interests are served, which voices are excluded, and how resistance can manifest within power relations (Smart 1985; Segall 2013).

This framework emphasises that the creation of knowledge is inherently political: it defines what counts as true or false, legitimises certain discourses and practices, and marginalises others (Foucault 1977; Smart 1985; Waghid/Davids 2017). By focusing on the interplay between power and knowledge, Foucault provides tools to critically examine context, enabling an understanding of how norms, expertise, and authority are produced and contested, and how alternative configurations of knowledge and practice might be imagined and enacted, i.e. a better socio-economic lived reality.

Torres

UNESCO (2015: 15) argues that the aim of GCE is “to be transformative, building the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need to be

able to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world,” and that it addresses achieving the educational Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). This aim aligns closely with that of responsible leadership. In 2017, Torres shared his interpretation of GCE through what he refers to as three global commons: the planet is our only world, people should live peacefully together in a diverse world, and people should live as equal beings in a democratic society.

Social justice in this context asks of teachers to select a curriculum and use pedagogical actions “that aim to foster and promote not only skills but, most importantly, values such as empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity, and actions to address human rights, poverty and environmental issues” (Bosio 2020: 190). Often, this can only be achieved through pedagogical encounters that provoke reflexivity and the promise of moving from noticing and becoming aware to taking action. As such, “GCE is a crucial tool for fostering critical consciousness, collaboration, and interconnectedness in an increasingly globalised world” (Bosio/Torres/Gaudelli 2023: 196) as students are encouraged to explore their biases, lenses, and blind spots in conversation and in relation to others and the self in the learning community. In this way, problem-focused education, concerning the lived social and environmental challenges of students and their communities, offers the promise of moving from social consciousness to praxis. In this way, GCE offers a hope for our planet and its people of a future with enhanced social wellness.

Waghid

Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999: 34–35) defines *ubuntu* as a term that “...speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone, we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu’; ‘Hey, he or she has Ubuntu.’ This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate... It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs”. Premised on the notion of *ubuntu*, Waghid has developed an African philosophy of education that is simultaneously disruptive and caring, allowing for the recognition of human dignity and interconnectedness. Waghid (2018: 60) further states, “an encounter framed

through Ubuntu is a responsible action in the sense that people recognise one another’s vulnerabilities and actually do something about changing what people experience”.

African philosophy of education and African theories of education, while closely related, operate at different levels of abstraction, with the former providing the normative and ontological grounding for understanding what it means to be human, to know, and to learn, and the latter translating these philosophical commitments into pedagogical approaches and practices (Waghid 2013; Letseka 2012). Central to this philosophical tradition is ubuntu, which emphasises relationality, interdependence, and shared humanity (Letseka 2012; Metz 2011). Education grounded in African philosophical traditions, such as *ubuntu* (Waghid 2013), therefore, welcomes the lived experiences of all students into the learning space and offers opportunities to be in conversation with one another, to share their views, to reflect on feedback received, to re-articulate their stance, and, in doing so, to grow in confidence to participate and to belong with others. Importantly, foregrounding African theories and philosophies of education, such as ubuntu, contributes to creating spaces of belonging and epistemic validation for students whose ways of knowing have historically been marginalised. Such approaches help decentre Western epistemic dominance in Higher Education and support more self-determined ways of thinking among those historically marginalised. An African philosophy of education can therefore be seen as inherently linked to two key actions: interacting with others and articulating one’s ideas in their presence. To engage with others in this way, participating in a shared, deliberative environment, places individuals in a position where their understandings are both shaped and challenged within the collective context of education.

Considered together, Freire, Foucault, Torres, and Waghid provide a theoretical framework presenting an alternative pedagogical approach that requires further investigation to illustrate how it can be applied in practice.

4. Methodological approach

To answer the research question *How can Chartered Accountant education be reimagined to develop ethically grounded, socially responsible professionals who are equipped to make consequence-aware decisions and to contribute to sustainable value creation and business resilience?*

We adopted a conceptual-theoretical, qualitative inquiry. Conceptual research focuses on developing new ways of understanding a phenomenon by integrating, reinterpreting, or extending existing theoretical perspectives and the aim is not to explain or generalise empirically (Heinonen/Tom. 2024; Gatley 2023; Wen 2025).

In this study, conceptual inquiry was used to construct a theoretical framework for reimagining CA education, drawing on the work of various philosophers of critical educational theory. Using the proposed theoretical framework as a lens, we considered artefacts, such as programme design and curriculum documents. From these, we selected vignettes to demonstrate how the framework can be operationalised within a specific qualification. This approach is comparable to other studies conducted in Higher Education, such as studies by James (2014) and as a component in Bui's (2025) study.

The study's research question guided the selection of theoretical sources, and due consideration was given to the Global South context. The theorists engaged in this study were chosen because their work addresses the ethical, political, and pedagogical dimensions of education that are often marginalised within technocratic professional curricula. The theoretical framework is not intended as an exhaustive review of critical educational theory. Instead, it engages selectively and purposively with theorists whose work offers conceptual resources for rethinking the aims and practices of CA education. Instead of viewing theories as self-contained systems, they are used as practical tools that can be adapted and combined based on the needs of accounting education. This framework is grounded in specific values and outlines educational principles that emphasise ethics.

To demonstrate how the theoretical framework was applied in practice, the framework was used as a lens to review artefacts. Artefacts included

curriculum design documents, module outlines and assessment guidelines, content, lesson plans and assessments for learning. These materials were purposively selected because they represent the intended curriculum. As such, they provide a relevant way of illustrating how the theoretical constructs were embedded in the pedagogical approach.

We used purposive identification of examples which most clearly demonstrate the intended integration of the four-theorist framework. The process was guided by professional judgement, informed by familiarity with the whole programme, and aimed at ensuring a balanced representation across the four theorists. However, drawing on other research approaches, we followed Patton's (2015) purposive criterion sampling principles to select up to three examples for each theorist in the framework. We used the following as inclusion criteria: (1) clear alignment with the theoretical constructs of the relevant theorist; (2) representation of meaningful teaching, learning, or assessment practice; and (3) demonstrated potential to contribute to graduate attributes of ethical awareness, social responsibility, and sustainability-mindedness.

For each theoretical perspective, one or more illustrative examples are presented as vignettes to demonstrate how core concepts, such as critical consciousness, disciplinary power, deliberative engagement, and global citizenship, can be operationalised within accounting education. In some instances, examples illustrate the integration of multiple theoretical insights, showing how curriculum elements can simultaneously address ethical development, democratic participation, and professional competence.

The result is a curated set of practice-based vignettes that serve to illuminate the framework in action, rather than a comprehensive thematic analysis of all curriculum artefacts. These illustrative examples are not presented as evidence of effectiveness or impact. Instead, they serve to enhance conceptual clarity and demonstrate the coherence between the theoretical framework and curriculum design intentions. According to Hughes and Huby (2004), Jeffries and Maeder (2005), and Torres (2009) (as in Skilling and Stylianides, 2019), vignettes are understood as written, visual, or oral prompts that are methodologically and paradigmatically aligned with the research design,

depict recognisable and plausible situations, and are intended to engage participants in ways that elicit responses such as beliefs, perceptions, emotions, affective reactions, reflective judgments, and decision-making processes. The selection of vignettes was guided by three criteria: (1) clarity of alignment with a component of the theoretical framework; (2) richness of contextual detail; and (3) representativeness of the broader dataset. Each vignette is presented in the findings and discussion section, along with commentary linking it to the relevant element of the theoretical framework.

5. Findings and discussion

This section presents vignettes from the BCom in Accounting programme that demonstrate how the theoretical framework, integrating the work of Freire, Foucault, Torres, and Waghid, has been embedded in the curriculum design. Each sub-section begins with a brief theoretical anchor, followed by one or more illustrative examples drawing from activities, assessments, or learning experiences, and concludes with reflections on their intended contribution to developing ethically grounded, socially responsible, and sustainability-minded accounting graduates.

Freire

Theoretical anchoring

Freire's critical pedagogy conceptualises education as a practice of freedom, oriented towards the development of conscientization, which is the capacity to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions critically and to act against oppressive elements of reality. Within professional education, this entails moving beyond technical mastery towards cultivating critical awareness of how professional knowledge is produced, normalised, and ethically consequential. In the context of accounting education, this translates into an invitation for students to interrogate the assumptions embedded in accounting standards and to reflect on their societal and ethical implications.

Illustrative operationalisation in curriculum design

An illustration of this approach can be seen in the design of learning activities within Financial Reporting and Compliance modules, where technically

prescribed accounting standards are intentionally treated as opportunities for critical interrogation rather than unquestioned authority. While these modules prioritise technical competence, the curriculum is deliberately structured to surface ethical and conceptual tensions embedded within professional norms.

One such illustration involves the treatment of intangible assets. Students engage with both the relevant accounting standard governing the recognition of intangible assets and the broader conceptual framework that underpins the development of accounting standards. They are prompted to identify and reflect on the differences between the definitions and recognition criteria articulated in these two sources, and to critically evaluate the claim by standard setters that these differences nevertheless lead to equivalent outcomes. Through structured peer discussion, students are invited to consider alternative interpretations or outcomes, thereby challenging dominant professional narratives and developing critical awareness of the constructed nature of accounting knowledge.

This critical engagement is further deepened through the examination of a South African court case involving contested claims to intellectual property and future economic benefits. Although the case does not centre directly on asset recognition, it exposes students to the ethical and practical complexities of ownership, entitlement, and professional judgement. By engaging with this real-world contradiction, students are encouraged to reflect on how professional accountants navigate ethical tensions in contexts where legal, economic, and moral considerations intersect.

Later in the curriculum, students revisit the ethical dimensions of intangible asset reporting through engagement with the Steinhoff corporate scandal. After examining investigative analyses that identify red flags in the reporting of intangible assets, students are invited to reflect on whether the financial statements provided a fair representation and to consider the ethical responsibilities of professional accountants when confronted with potentially misleading representations. Peer discussion encourages students to explore accountability from multiple perspectives, including those of preparers, auditors, and engaged citizens.

Through these intentionally designed curriculum interventions, Freire's notion of conscientization is operationalised as an ongoing pedagogical process. Students are encouraged to recognise contradictions within technical accounting practices, to question the neutrality of professional standards, and to reflect on their own ethical agency within constrained institutional contexts. Rather than positioning accounting standards as fixed truths, the curriculum invites students to understand them as socially constructed instruments with material consequences for stakeholders.

While Freire (1996) foregrounds the development of critical consciousness and ethical agency, such agency is exercised within institutional contexts shaped by dominant knowledge systems and power relations (Foucault 1977, 1980a, 1980b). To account for these aspects, the framework next draws on Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge.

Foucault

Theoretical anchor

Foucault's analysis highlights how systems of knowledge both shape and are shaped by power relations. In accounting, this perspective reveals how professional standards, laws, and practices can legitimise certain interests while marginalising others.

Illustrative operationalisation in curriculum design

An illustration of Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge can be seen in the design of learning activities within a second-year Strategy and Leadership module, where ethical decision-making is situated within the operation of dominant knowledge frameworks that shape professional reasoning and constrain available courses of action. Drawing on Foucault's insight that systems of knowledge both produce and legitimise particular forms of power, the curriculum invites students to interrogate how accounting standards, ethical models, and business frameworks function as normative instruments rather than neutral tools.

Students are introduced to concepts such as responsible capitalism, stakeholder theory, and the Triple Bottom Line as alternative frameworks to shareholder priorities, expanding their understanding of how business

decisions distribute benefits and burdens across different stakeholder groups. As students work through the ethical dilemma, they apply multiple ethical frameworks to the same case, revealing how different models foreground particular values and obscure others. This comparative engagement encourages critical reflection on how ethical reasoning is shaped by dominant paradigms and how professional norms may legitimise certain outcomes while rendering others less visible.

The module's curriculum culminates in a structured ethical decision-making exercise, adapted from an existing analysis and decision-making framework, in which students are required to justify a course of action while acknowledging competing ethical claims and structural constraints. The task is explicitly framed as having no straightforward resolution, reinforcing the idea that ethical decision-making in business operates within complex power relations rather than clear moral binaries.

Through these curriculum design choices, Foucault's concept of power-knowledge is operationalised by making visible how professional standards, ethical frameworks, and business models shape what can be thought, justified, and enacted within organisational contexts. Students are invited to recognise that ethical challenges in accounting and business are not merely individual dilemmas but are structured by dominant discourses and institutional arrangements.

Having examined how power-knowledge frameworks structure ethical reasoning, the framework turns to Torres's conception of global citizenship to explore how professional responsibility might be ethically expanded beyond organisational and national boundaries.

Torres

Theoretical anchor

Torres positions GCE as fostering global civic virtues, peaceful coexistence, and responsibility for both human and non-human life. In professional accounting, this entails awareness of global interconnectedness, sustainability imperatives, and the role of accountants in advancing the UN SDGs.

Illustrative operationalisation in curriculum design

An illustration of Torres's conception of GCE is evident in the design of learning activities in the second-year Strategy and Leadership module, where global citizenship is positioned as a core ethical orientation for professional decision-making rather than an abstract concept. In line with Torres's emphasis on global interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and civic virtues, the curriculum is intentionally designed to expand students' moral horizons beyond national, organisational, or narrowly professional boundaries.

The introduction to global citizenship begins with a reflective prompt that invites students to imagine themselves as citizens of a world without borders and to consider how such an identity might reshape their sense of responsibility. This initial reflection functions as a pedagogical entry point, encouraging students to interrogate assumptions about belonging, obligation, and professional identity. Students then engage with curated readings and multimedia resources that introduce the principles of global citizenship and the UN SDGs as a shared global ethical framework. The inclusion of a recorded interview with Distinguished Professor Waghid further situates global citizenship within a broader ethical and philosophical discourse, emphasising the moral dimensions of civic responsibility in an interconnected world.

Global citizenship is subsequently operationalised through engagement with business contexts that foreground the ethical implications of corporate decision-making across local, continental, and global scales. Students examine a South African retail organisation that publicly positions itself as committed to sustainability, ethical sourcing, and community engagement. Through guided reflection and peer discussion, students are invited to consider how leadership decisions within the organisation reflect deliberation about global responsibility, stakeholder inclusion, and long-term sustainability. This engagement reinforces Torres's argument that global citizenship is not merely an individual disposition but is enacted through institutional and organisational practices.

The curriculum deliberately avoids presenting global citizenship as a simplistic or idealised construct. In a later engagement, the same organisation is revisited in relation to controversy surrounding its environmental impact and stakeholder responses. Students examine how corporate citizenship can be contested and how ethical commitments may come under pressure in the face of competing economic and environmental interests. By engaging with shareholder activism and demands for greater transparency, students are prompted to reflect on accountability, trust, and the ethical responsibilities of organisations operating within global economic systems.

Through this sequence of curriculum design choices, Torres’s conception of global citizenship is operationalised as an ethical and civic orientation integral to professional practice. Students are encouraged to engage critically with global challenges, to recognise their shared responsibility for sustainable futures, and to situate accounting and leadership decisions within broader social and environmental systems. While no claims are made regarding learning outcomes, the illustration demonstrates how GCE can be embedded within professional curricula to support the formation of ethically aware and socially responsible business professionals.

Torres’s articulation of global citizenship opens an ethical horizon of shared responsibility, which is given relational and deliberative grounding through Waghid’s African philosophy of education and emphasis on *ubuntu*.

Waghid

Theoretical anchor

Waghid’s *ubuntu*-informed pedagogy foregrounds care, compassion, and communal responsibility, alongside reflexive engagement with others. For accountants, this means recognising the human and community impact of financial decisions.

Illustrative operationalisation in curriculum design

An illustration of Waghid’s *ubuntu*-informed conception of democratic citizenship can be seen in the design of learning activities within a second-year Strategy and Leadership module, where ethical formation is framed as a relational, dialogical, and deliberative process. Drawing on Waghid’s *Journal of Ethics in Higher Education* 8(2026)

emphasis on *ubuntu*, the curriculum positions professional decision-making as inseparable from attentiveness to others and to the social consequences of action.

In this module, students are introduced to ethical theories and value systems, with a deliberate focus on *ubuntu* as an African philosophical orientation that shapes both personal and professional conduct. This engagement is situated alongside discussions of decoloniality and global citizenship, encouraging students to reflect on systemic inequities and the interconnectedness of individuals and communities. The inclusion of recorded interviews with Distinguished Professor Waghid and selected topical readings invites students to engage directly with philosophical arguments concerning deliberation, human potentiality, and ethical responsibility in contemporary business contexts.

The pedagogical approach adopted in the module is explicitly reflective and dialogic, aligning with Waghid's view that democratic education requires spaces for ethical deliberation, dissensus, and reflexive engagement with others. Through structured reflective journaling, students are prompted to consider the challenges and possibilities of incorporating *ubuntu*-based leadership within profit-oriented business environments. They are invited to reflect on potential resistance to such an approach and to consider strategies for navigating opposing perspectives in professional contexts, thereby engaging with ethical pluralism rather than seeking consensus or simple resolution.

The module culminates in a formative, graded essay requiring students to apply *ubuntu* principles to business decision-making and to analyse the societal implications of leadership choices critically. This assessment aligns ethical reflection with academic judgement, reinforcing *ubuntu* as a substantive ethical framework rather than an abstract cultural ideal. Through this task, ethical deliberation is positioned as integral to professional reasoning and accountability.

Taken together, these curriculum design choices illustrate how Waghid's conception of democratic citizenship and ethical becoming is operationalised within professional education. *ubuntu* is positioned as an ethical grammar that

foregrounds relational responsibility, deliberative engagement, and attentiveness to the human consequences of business decisions. While no claims are made regarding learning outcomes, the illustration demonstrates how professional curricula can be designed to cultivate ethically grounded professionals capable of consequence-aware decision-making, grounded in care, inclusivity, and communal responsibility.

To synthesise the illustrative examples and highlight the coherence of the theoretical framework, Table 1 provides an overview of how each theoretical perspective informs specific curriculum design choices and ethical formation emphases.

Table 1: Overview of theoretical framework and illustrative curriculum design elements

Philosophical underpinning	Core ethical focus	Illustrative curriculum design
Freire: Critical pedagogy	Conscientization, emancipation and dialogical pedagogy	Interrogation of accounting standards and ethical contradictions through structured reflection
Foucault: Power-knowledge	Capacity to critically examine context, challenging power constructs to consider alternative possibilities	Critical engagement with ethical frameworks and stakeholder models in complex dilemmas
Torres: Global citizenship	Global commons	Engagement with socially responsible corporate citizenship and SDGs in business decision-making
Waghid: <i>ubuntu</i> -inspired democratic citizenship	Relational deliberation	Reflective and dialogic pedagogy grounded in <i>ubuntu</i> and decolonial perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This study explores how CA education might be reimagined to cultivate ethically grounded, socially responsible professionals capable of consequence-aware decision-making and contributing to sustainable value creation and business resilience. In response to the persistent dominance of technocratic and compliance-oriented approaches within professional accounting education, the paper advanced a critical-interpretive conceptual framework that repositions the curriculum as a site of ethical formation, civic responsibility, and democratic engagement.

Drawing on the complementary insights of Freire (1996), Foucault (1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1990, 1995), Torres (2017), and Waghid (2018), the framework foregrounds education as a normative and political endeavour rather than a neutral transmission of technical knowledge. Freire's emphasis on conscientization highlights the importance of developing critical awareness and ethical agency; Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge draws attention to the structural and discursive constraints shaping professional reasoning; Torres's conception of global citizenship expands ethical responsibility beyond organisational and national boundaries; and Waghid's *ubuntu*-informed philosophy of democratic education provides a relational and deliberative grounding for ethical becoming. Taken together, these perspectives offer a coherent theoretical foundation for rethinking the purposes and practices of professional accounting education.

The illustrative examples drawn from the design of a BCom in Accounting programme demonstrate how this theoretical framework can be operationalised through intentional curriculum design. Rather than serving as evaluative evidence, these illustrations function as theory-informed exemplars, showing how ethical reflection, deliberation, and responsibility can be embedded within technically demanding professional curricula. By treating accounting standards, ethical frameworks, and business models as objects of critical engagement, the curriculum design foregrounds the ethical implications of professional judgement and positions students as emerging professionals accountable to multiple stakeholders and broader societal concerns.

Importantly, this paper does not claim to demonstrate the effectiveness or outcomes of the curriculum described. Its contribution lies in articulating a principled, theoretically grounded approach to curriculum design that challenges narrow instrumental framings of accounting education. In doing so, it responds to growing calls for higher education, particularly in professional fields, to address questions of ethics, citizenship, and social justice more explicitly and systematically.

Situated within the South African higher education context and informed by Global South perspectives, the framework is offered as a theoretically adaptable model rather than a prescriptive solution. While sensitive to context, its underlying ethical commitments to critical awareness, democratic deliberation, global responsibility, and relational accountability resonate with broader international debates on the role of higher education in addressing complex social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Future research will build on this conceptual foundation through qualitative empirical inquiry, examining how the intended curriculum is enacted in practice and experienced by students and educators. Such work will be essential for exploring the alignment between curricular intentions, pedagogical practices, and the formation of professional identity over time. However, as this paper has argued, empirical evaluation must be preceded by careful conceptual clarification of educational purposes and ethical commitments.

By repositioning CA education as a space for ethical and civic formation, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about higher education's responsibilities in shaping professionals who are not only technically competent but also ethically reflective, socially responsive, and committed to democratic and sustainable futures. In this sense, the framework offered here invites educators, institutions, and professional bodies to reconsider what it means to educate accountants and, more broadly, business professionals, for a world marked by inequality, uncertainty, and shared global responsibility.

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8. Short biographies

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Dr Terblanche’s research explores the intersections of commerce, education, ethics, and professional formation, emphasising the development of socially responsible, ethically grounded professionals capable of addressing contemporary challenges in business and society. Beyond academia, she is actively engaged with professional bodies, promoting standards of integrity and accountability within the accounting profession. Her work bridges theory and practice, demonstrating how reflective education and ethical formation can shape both individual careers and broader societal outcomes.

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Marilize Putter is the Chief Academic Officer at Milpark Education with 16 years’ experience in private higher education. Marilize is currently pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) in Higher Education Management at the University of Bath, UK. Her research explores digital transformation and intellectual capital in higher education, with an emphasis on how institutions can strengthen their knowledge assets to improve organisational performance and student outcomes. Marilize also holds an MBA from the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business.

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A Professional Collaboration: Inclusive Pedagogy to Maximise Participation for all Students

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Keywords

Inclusive pedagogy; access; online higher education; digital equity; professional collaboration; student participation

Abstract

As online learning within higher education continues to expand, it raises important questions related to epistemological access, participation, and inclusion within the online learning environment. While online education is often associated with flexibility and widening access, unequal access to technology, varying levels of digital fluency, and diverse student learning experiences may unintentionally reproduce forms of exclusion within online spaces. Within the South African higher education context, these questions call for ongoing reflection on how online teaching and learning environments are designed to support diverse students.

This paper is a conceptual and reflective discussion emerging from a collaborative pedagogical engagement between lecturers in the fields of Information and Communication Technology and Inclusive Education during the transition to a new learning management system at STADIO Higher Education. Drawing on Florian's Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action, the paper reflects how collaborative pedagogical engagement created opportunities to reconsider existing course design practices and incorporate inclusive practices in online learning contexts.

Through reflective engagement with online course redesign, the authors considered how inclusive teaching approaches may contribute towards more responsive teaching and learning strategies to strengthen participation and epistemological access for diverse students. The paper further argues that professional collaboration creates an important space to discuss pedagogical choices, challenge assumptions about student participation, and capability.

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1. Introduction

Distance online learning has expanded within higher education, this has intensified debates related to epistemological access, participation and equity within digitally mediated learning environments. Even though online learning is frequently positioned as an accessible and flexible mode of teaching and learning, these assumptions require a critical interrogation within the context characterised by inequality, diverse student learning experiences, and uneven access to technology. Within the context of South African Higher education, varying levels of digital literacy and digital inequities are persistent, this continues to shape students' engagement with online learning. Research therefore cautions that without careful pedagogical consideration; the online learning environment may reproduce forms of exclusion that constrain access to learning and meaningful engagement.

Following Tripp's (2011) conception of critical incidents as an event that acquires meaning through reflection on practice. The transition to Canvas as a new Learning Management System (LMS) represented a critical incident due to disrupting the established pedagogical routines and it highlighted challenges related to institutional support, digital literacy, and adaption to technological change. The introduction of Canvas raised concerns related to accessing the learning materials, course navigation, and the students' understanding of assessment expectations. Although these challenges initially appeared to be technical in nature, critical reflection revealed a broader pedagogical and epistemological concerns regarding how online course design may enable or constrain learning and access within a digitally mediated learning environment. Emerging through an interdisciplinary collaboration between Information and Communication Technology and Inclusive Education, the paper demonstrates how dialogic cross-disciplinary praxis created a reflexive space for interrogating normative assumptions underpinning online teaching and learning.

Framed conceptually through Florian and Spratt's (2013) Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action, the paper reflects on how collaborative course redesign may support more inclusive forms of online participation by extending what is ordinarily available to all students rather than positioning

support as individual accommodation. The paper contributes a conceptual and reflective discussion of professional collaboration as pedagogical praxis and considers how inclusive pedagogical thinking may strengthen access to knowledge practices within online higher education. Positioned as reflective and conceptual scholarship grounded in professional practice rather than an empirical qualitative study, the paper seeks to critically examine the pedagogical implications of collaborative reflection for inclusive online teaching and learning.

Additionally, the paper contributes to emerging conversations on inclusive online higher education by conceptualising professional collaboration as a form of pedagogical reflexivity through which lecturers may critically reconsider assumptions underpinning digitally mediated support for learning, epistemological access which refers to students’ meaningful access to knowledge, ways of thinking, and disciplinary practices, rather than simply access to educational institutions (Morrow 2009), and inclusive course design. In doing so, the paper extends discussions on inclusive pedagogy beyond accommodation-based approaches toward a more relational and design-oriented understanding of student engagement within online higher education contexts.

2. Literature review

Online Learning in Higher Education

The expansion of online learning in higher education has been driven by increasing demands for flexibility, accessibility, and alternative modes of educational participation (Daymont/Blau/Campbell 2011). While online learning may widen access to higher education, its implementation is not without complexity. Thaanyane and Jita (2026: 5) suggest that inequalities are deeply rooted, specifically in communities that were previously disadvantaged and need to be addressed to allow access to online learning. From an inclusive education perspective, digitally mediated learning environments may either support or constrain equitable participation depending on how they are pedagogically designed. Unequal access to digital

learning for all is in opposition to the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) which aims to develop equitable and inclusive education for all (Tang 2015). Carrim and Bekker (2022) cautioned that if digital education is not intentionally designed for inclusion, it can risk reproducing barriers to learning and engagement with the course content. Similarly, Lomellini et al. (2022) argue that if online learning environments are poorly designed it may marginalise students with diverse learning needs, particularly within contexts that are characterised by persistent digital inequalities related to connectivity, access, and digital literacy (Praveen et al. 2025).

Experiences that occurred during the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching period in South Africa, further revealed that educational equity is not only achieved through technological provision alone (Moosa/Bekker 2022). Tate and Warschauer (2022) therefore contend that equitable online learning requires deliberate structural, pedagogical, and institutional responsiveness. Without such intentionality, online learning may reinforce existing inequalities rather than disrupt them. Within this context, inclusive pedagogy becomes an important framework for reconsidering how online higher education environments are designed to support successful online learning and access to the course content and resources.

Inclusive Pedagogy and Inclusive Practice

Inclusive pedagogy extends beyond individualised support practices by foregrounding how educators respond to student diversity through pedagogical choices that support learning for all students (Florian 2015). Central to this position is the understanding that learner difference is an ordinary and essential aspect of human development rather than a problem requiring remediation (Florian/Black-Hawkins 2011). Inclusive pedagogy therefore challenges deficit-oriented approaches that position support as additional provision for some students and instead emphasises extending what is ordinarily available within the learning environment to everybody (Florian/Spratt 2013).

This shift foregrounds questions of social justice and pedagogical responsibility within higher education. Moving beyond normative “bell-

curve” approaches to teaching (see Figure 1), inclusive pedagogy seeks to disrupt practices that marginalise students whose learning needs fall outside dominant assumptions about ability and participation (Florian 2012). Within online learning environments, this requires critical consideration of how course structures, communication practices, and digital resources may either widen or constrain students’ learning. Such considerations resonate with aspects of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Gryshchenko/Kovalchuk 2025), which similarly emphasise flexible pathways for engagement, representation, and access within learning environments. However, within this paper, Florian’s inclusive pedagogical framework remains central in foregrounding participation and pedagogical responsibility in relation to student difference.

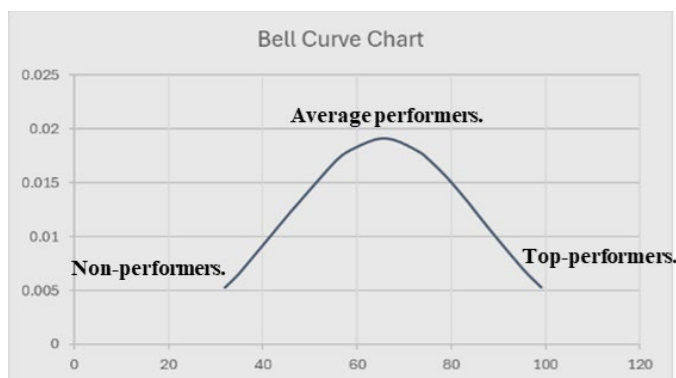


Figure 1: Example of a Bell Curve – Adapted from Florian (2012), this illustrates how normative “bell-curve” approaches to teaching may privilege assumptions of standardised ability and participation.

Responding to Difference through Collaborative Pedagogical Engagement

The transition to a new LMS revealed tensions between navigating institutional technological demands and designing pedagogically responsive online learning environments. A recurring challenge within inclusive online teaching relates to the assumptions about lecturer preparedness to be able to support increasingly diverse student cohorts. Florian and Spratt (2013) argue that lecturers must believe they can teach all students whilst resisting

deterministic assumption about ability and difference. Similarly, the framework proposed by Rouse (2006) of knowing, doing, and believing highlights how lecturers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices help shape inclusive pedagogical development (see Figure 2).

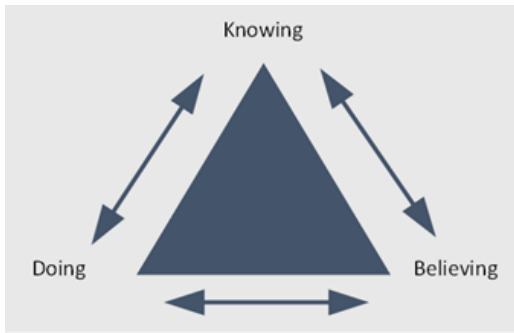


Figure 2: Rouse's Model - Adapted from Rouse (2006) foregrounds the interconnected relationship between the lecturer's knowledge, beliefs, and pedagogical practices.

This professional collaboration emerged as a catalyst for supporting pedagogical responsiveness within this context. We shared different perspectives regarding pedagogical choices and how to structure the online courses. This compelled us to rethink our own practice to support students successfully. Through a series of critical dialogues and reflections, the lecturers interrogated the assumptions underpinning online teaching practices and reconsidered how access and participation were structured within the course environment. This critical dialogue changed the way in which the course design was conceptualised using our interdisciplinary experiences and expertise. Aligned with Andrew, Tolson and Ferguson (2008); and Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021), who emphasised the importance of shared expertise, collaboration, and pedagogical experimentation in supporting inclusive teaching practices.

Our engagement with inclusive pedagogy undergirded what Norwich (2007; 2013) conceptualises as the dilemma of difference — the tension between responding to individual learning needs while avoiding processes of marginalisation and categorisation. Recognising difference may enable support for students experiencing barriers to learning, yet it may also reinforce

exclusion through labelling. Conversely, approaches that prioritise commonality may lead to obscuring the specific forms of support some students require. Florian and Spratt’s (2013) notion of full inclusion attempts to move beyond this binary by balancing responsiveness to individual needs within the collective learning community. Within this study, these tensions became central to reconsidering how online course design could support learning without reproducing deficit-based understandings of student difference.

Applying Inclusive Pedagogy: Conceptual Framing of the Redesign Process

This paper draws on critical narrative reflection situated within reflexive and practice-based scholarship to examine collaborative inclusive pedagogical practice within online higher education. Positioned within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the study adopts a reflective and design-oriented perspective rather than a formal empirical qualitative approach. The focus therefore rests on how collaborative engagement with course artefacts informed iterative module redesign and pedagogical decision-making.

Florian’s Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (Florian/Spratt 2013) provided the conceptual framework underpinning the inquiry. The framework foregrounds three assumptions: that learner difference is an ordinary aspect of human development, that lecturers must believe they can teach all students, and that lecturers continually develop new ways of working with others. These assumptions informed critical reflection on pedagogical choices, course design practices, and inclusive participation within the online module (see Figure 3).

Assumptions 1	Essential Aspects
•Difference is accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualization of learning	
Assumptions 2	Qualified and Capable
•That teachers must believe that they are qualified to and capable of teaching all.	
Assumptions 3	Continual Professional Development
•Teachers continually develop creative and new ways of working with others	

Figure 3: Florian’s Three Assumptions - Adapted from (Florian/Spratt 2013: 124) this illustrates the three interconnected assumptions underpinning Florian’s Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action, which informed the lecturers’ reflective engagement with participation, learner difference, and responsive online course design.

The course that required redesign is an online End User Computing module, Computer Practice for Teachers, where challenges related to navigation, participation, and access emerged during the transition to the new LMS. Insights into inclusive online pedagogy emerged through shared pedagogical inquiry and engagement with course artefacts, including assessment tasks, learning activities, multimodal resources, and navigational structures. These artefacts became sites for evaluating how online course design may enable or constrain epistemological access and successful acquisition of the skills and knowledge required to succeed

Constructive alignment (Biggs/Tang 2011) informed the redesign process by foregrounding coherence between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment practices. Reflexivity remained central throughout, as assumptions regarding digital competence, and access were critically reconsidered. Rather than positioning barriers as student deficits, the redesign process underscored pedagogical responsibility in creating learning environments that acknowledge diversity and support meaningful participation within online higher education contexts.

3. Pedagogical insights: Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action

The following insights were derived from the collaborative engagement and restructuring of the course design to ensure that more support was provided to the students. Florian and Spratt’s (2013: 124) assumptions as concepts were used to interpret our design decisions, tensions, revisions, and pedagogical reflections, was considered when redesigning aspects of the course

Assumption 1: Difference is accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualisation of learning

A key insight emerging from this study was that recognising student difference as an ordinary aspect of learning required critical reconsideration of how course information, expectations, and learning pathways were communicated. Mindful of the dilemma of difference (Norwich 2007; 2013), we adopted an approach that acknowledged cohort diversity without positioning students as deficient or separate from the mainstream learning experience. Initially, the institutionally prescribed course blueprint reflected normative assumptions regarding students’ digital fluency, confidence, and access to technology. These assumptions created barriers for students engaging with the course from differing educational, linguistic, socio-economic, and technological contexts.

Engaging with Florian’s (2015: 12) inclusive pedagogical principle of extending what is ordinarily available to everybody prompted critical reflection on how course activities, assessments, and communication practices either constrained or widened participation. This demonstrated the importance of pedagogically responsive design that anticipated learner diversity from the outset through more intentional alignment between course content, learning activities, and assessment practices.

In response, course instructions and learning pathways were deliberately scaffolded to provide multiple points of access and engagement. The redesign of the welcome video emerged as a critical pedagogical intervention. Rather

than performing as a static introduction, the video was embedded within the architecture of the course to help orientate students to the structure, expectations, and navigation of the module. In addition, the integration of an interactive multimodal SCORM (Shareable Content Object Reference Model) package enabled students to engage with information at their own pace, revisit key explanations, and check their understanding through embedded activities and prompts (see Figures 4–8). These revisions also aligned with principles associated with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), particularly through providing multiple means of representation and engagement that sought to support variability in how students accessed, navigated, and engaged with course information (Gryshchenko/Kovalchuk 2025). Rather than positioning support as additional provision for selected students, the redesign attempted to embed flexibility and accessibility within the ordinary architecture of the learning environment.

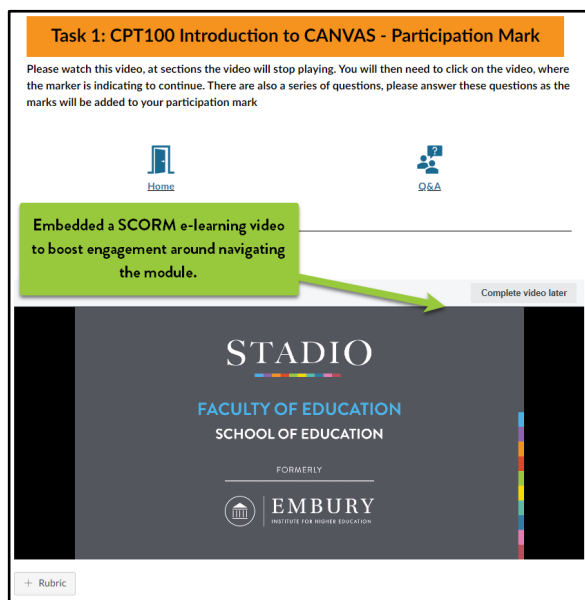


Figure 4: Addition of a SCORM package. Scaffolding orientation to the online course.

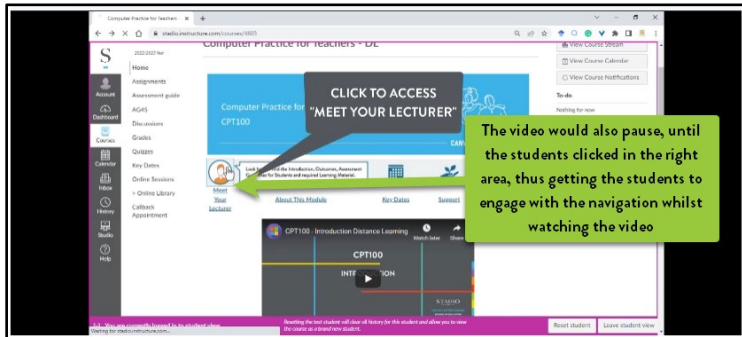


Figure 5: Addition of clickable hotspots in the SCORM Package. Clickable hotspots reduced navigational ambiguity by foregrounding key course information visually and interactively.

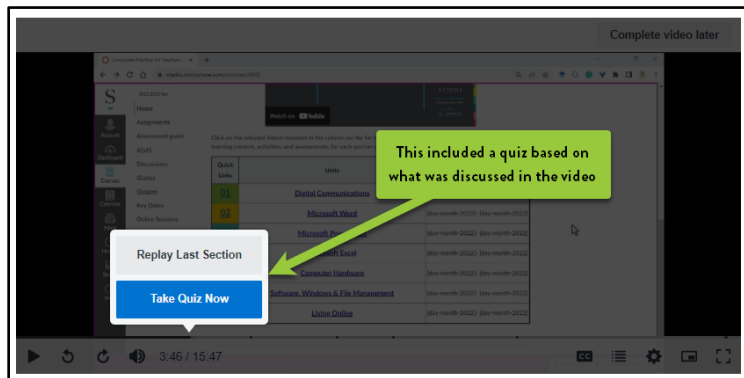


Figure 6: Addition of short questions inside the SCORM Package. Embedded questions supported scaffolded engagement by enabling students to check and consolidate their understanding throughout the course orientation process.

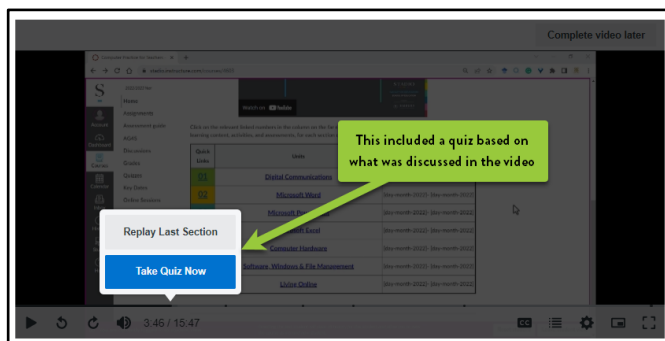


Figure 7: Example of a question inside the SCORM Package. Embedded questions created opportunities for formative engagement and self-monitoring throughout the learning process

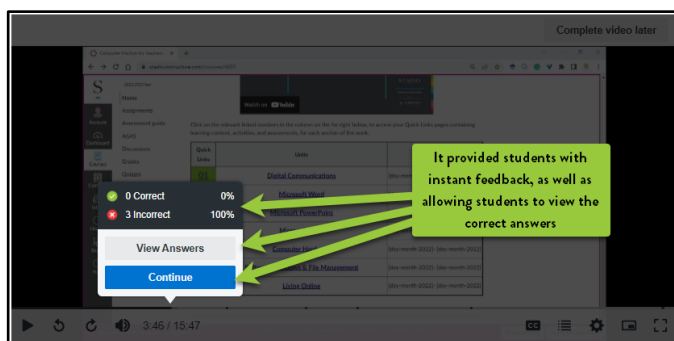


Figure 8: Example of feedback provided inside the SCORM Package. The students could engage with the feedback to better improve their outcome, or they could continue through the video.

These revisions acknowledged differences in digital confidence, learning pace, language proficiency, and familiarity with the online learning environments whilst supporting engagement.

The process of the redesign also foregrounded tensions between the institutional standardisation, and inclusive pedagogical responsiveness. Institutionally prescribed course structures often reflected implicit assumptions regarding engagement, participation, and digital confidence. However, the incorporation of scaffolded and multimodal approaches aided

in contributing to a noticeable reduction in student queries that were related to the navigation of the course and assessment expectations, suggesting that more accessible and clearer communication strengthened students' engagement with the course.

Consistent with Florian and Spratt's (2013) first assumption that learner differences should be understood as an ordinary aspect of human development, the assumptions regarding students' proficiency with technology requires critical reconsideration. Although many students had access to digital devices, this did not necessarily translate into confidence in navigating the LMS, particularly for students relying primarily on mobile devices. These experiences brought into sharper focus on how online course structures may unintentionally reflect homogenising assumptions about digital participation and engagement.

Engagement with the framework proposed by Florian and Spratt (2013) therefore foregrounded the importance of designing for learner variability through scaffolded navigation, multimodal communication, and flexible pathways for participation. This shifted the course design approach away from assumptions of uniform participation towards widening opportunities for engagement and access. At the same time, tensions remained between inclusive pedagogical responsiveness and the standardised requirements of institutionally prescribed online course structures. The collaborative dialogue created opportunities to interrogate tensions between institutional course standardisation and the need for more flexible and responsive pathways for engagement. Through this process, seemingly technical design decisions became sites for critically reconsidering how assumptions regarding digital participation and learner capability were embedded within the course structure. Nevertheless, the redesign process demonstrated the importance of online learning environments that acknowledge difference as ordinary within teaching and learning while seeking to minimise exclusion and widen participation.

Assumption 2: Teachers must believe that they are qualified to and capable of teaching all students.

The second assumption helped to foreground the significance of lecturer belief systems in helping shape pedagogically responsive practices within digitally mediated learning environments. The transition to Canvas disrupted the established pedagogical routines and initially destabilised the confidence of the lecturers in their capacity to support increasingly diverse cohort of students within a fully online environment. The dialogic engagement created a space for the lecturers to critically interrogate how routine online teaching practices may normalise assumptions regarding participation, digital competence, and independent navigation within online learning environments. The insights reveal that technological transitions are not experienced merely as technical adjustments, but as pedagogical disruptions that require lecturers to reconsider how teaching practices mediate participation, access, and inclusion. This resonates with Carrim and Bekker's (2022) argument that institutional transformation frequently exposes tensions between a lecturers' preparedness to enact inclusive pedagogical practices and technological change.

The reflective process clarified that the challenges associated with the transition to Canvas extended beyond issues of digital competence or functionality. Rather, the transition raised deeper epistemological concerns regarding how access to learning is structured and experienced within online environments. Engagement with inclusive pedagogy prompted a shift away from deficit-oriented assumptions about students' digital capabilities toward a reconceptualisation of pedagogical responsibility. Instead of locating barriers to learning within students themselves, the reflexive dialogue and shared pedagogical engagement reflected, the lecturer's responsibility to design learning environments that anticipate learner diversity from the outset. This aligns with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) inclusive pedagogical position that inclusion is strengthened through extending what is ordinarily available to all students, rather than through reactive accommodations targeted at individuals.

An important pedagogical insight emerging from the collaboration was that inclusive online pedagogy is enacted not solely through technological tools, but through lecturers’ epistemic beliefs about who can participate meaningfully within digitally mediated learning spaces. The enquiry reinforced that developing inclusive practices required lecturers to embrace the belief that diverse student cohorts could participate successfully within the online environment when pedagogical design intentionally reduced unnecessary barriers to engagement. In this context, lecturer agency became central to ensuring that the course content was accessible to support the students and rethinking how online learning environments may inadvertently privilege certain forms of navigation, participation, and digital competence over others.

Consequently, the process of redesigning involved simplifying course architecture, embedding scaffolded multimodal support throughout the module, and reducing unnecessary navigational complexity. These insights indicate that the interventions functioned not merely as technical elements, but also as a deliberate pedagogical response to the dilemma of differences (Norwich 2007; 2013). Rather than differentiating support for a selected group of students, the redesign sought to normalise accessibility by embedding a support structure within the ordinary learning experience for all students. Inclusivity was therefore repositioned from an individual accommodation model towards a universally responsive pedagogical orientation which was grounded in anticipation rather than remediation.

The reflective process was further informed by the importance of multimodal design in supporting inclusive participation within online learning environments. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) multimodal theory, meaning making was understood as occurring through the interaction of textual, auditory, visual, and spatial modes, each contributing differently to how students engage with knowledge constructions. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue that representing information through a range of modes enhances diversity of learning and meaning making by enabling students to engage with content in ways that are more accessible and cognitively responsive to their learning needs. Within this study, the use of annotated instructions, visual signposting, embedded guidance videos, and

structured navigational cues therefore operated as pedagogical mediators that supported students' orientation within the course environment. These multimodal supports reduced ambiguity, clarified expectations, and strengthened students' capacity to engage more independently with course content. Annotated instructions and visual cues were intentionally embedded within the course design to support student navigation and understanding (see Figures 9 and 10). In this way, multimodal design became central to reducing barriers associated with digitally mediated participation and widening epistemological access. In this sense, the redesign also reflected aspects associated with Universal Design for Learning through the provision of multiple pathways for engagement and representation (Gryshchenko/Kovalchuk 2025), although UDL, was not adopted as the primary conceptual framework guiding the study.

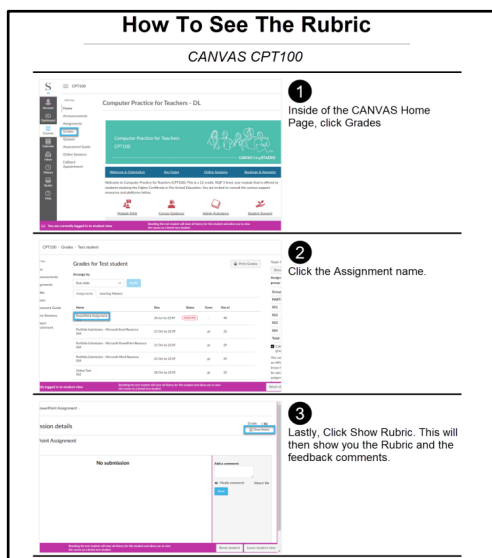


Figure 9: How to Find the Rubric in Canvas. This was a handout students received to help them gain access to their Rubric and feedback within Canvas.

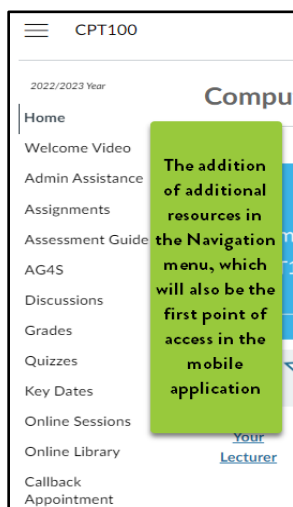


Figure 10: Example of an annotated note containing information for students. Helping them find the necessary information through signposting.

Importantly, the insights suggest that pedagogical responsiveness online learning environments need to extend beyond content delivery and towards the intentional design of accessible learning pathways. The collaborative redesign process created a reflective space in which assumptions about accessibility, digital participation, and competence which are normally taken-for-granted could be interrogated critically. Therefore, inclusive pedagogy emerged not as a fixed set of strategies or technical interventions, but rather as an ongoing process of pedagogical reflexivity in which lecturers continuously reconsider how learning environments might enable or constrain participation.

Ultimately, the analysis underscored that inclusive online pedagogy is fundamentally design-orientated, relational, and ethically grounded. The interventions significance did not lie solely in the inclusion of multimodal resources, or simplified navigational structures, but in how these pedagogical choices reflected the broader commitment to widening epistemological access and rethinking the responsibilities of the lecturer within the digitally mediated higher education contexts.

The reworking of instructional materials, course design and content demonstrated that inclusive pedagogy is enacted through everyday pedagogical decisions. By making implicit expectations explicit and designing resources that were designed to support more inclusive participation for all students, the lecturers were able to extend opportunities for support without resorting to individualised accommodations. This approach reflects Florian and Spratt's (2013) assertion that inclusive pedagogy involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available to everyone.

Assumption 3: Teachers continually develop creative and new ways of working with others.

A central pedagogical insight emerging from the collaborative process was that professional collaboration functioned not merely as collegial support, but as a critical mechanism for interrogating and reshaping pedagogical practice within digitally mediated higher education contexts. The insights point toward the redesign of the course that was strengthened through sustained reflective engagement between the two lecturers, enabling pedagogical challenges to be critically examined collectively rather than individually. In this way, collaboration became a condition by enabling a reconsideration of how online course design might facilitate or constrain a student's success, participation, and epistemological access.

The reflective engagement revealed that inclusive online pedagogy cannot solely be understood as the responsibility of an individual lecturer, particularly within the contexts which are characterised by the rapid change in technology, institutional LMS transitions, and the increasing student diversity. Rather, the collaborative partnership helped to create a dialogical and reflexive space in which pedagogical assumptions, disciplinary expertise, and design decisions could be critically interrogated and reworked. The analysis helped to reveal that this process of shared reflexivity enabled the lecturers to identify aspects of the navigation, course structure, and communication practices that may inadvertently reproduce exclusion within the online learning environments. Consequently, the process for the redesign

became less concerned with merely adapting content for online delivery and became more focused on critically rethinking how pedagogical choices shape digitally mediated participation and epistemological access.

Importantly, the insights gained suggest that collaboration contributed to the development of a more critically responsive pedagogical orientation. Through ongoing dialogue and shared pedagogical engagement, the lecturers moved beyond the procedural understanding of inclusion towards a deeper engagement with the relational and structural dimensions of inclusive pedagogy. This aligns with framework by Florian (2015), which emphasises extending what is ordinarily available to all students, rather than relying on individualised accommodations after barriers to participation has already emerged. Within this study, the collaborative redesign therefore reflected an intentional attempt to normalise support structures within the ordinary architecture of the online course, rather than positioning inclusion as an additional or compensatory intervention for selected students.

An important pedagogical insight that emerged from the collaboration was that the professional dialogue helped to support the development of pedagogical reflexivity. Through this reflective engagement it enabled the lecturers to question assumptions regarding students' independence, digital competence, and participation within online learning environments which are usually taken-for-granted. The analysis drew on the notion that many barriers to participation were not always inherent to students themselves, but were embedded within communication practices, the organisation, and the navigational design of the course environment. This collaboration therefore became a mechanism for making these often-invisible barriers to become visible and for collectively reimagining more accessible and pedagogical responsive approaches towards online teaching and learning.

Through the reflective engagement it was further demonstrated that collaborative pedagogical work contributed to not only the course redesign, but also to the learning and professional growth of the lecturer. The sustained engagement with inclusive pedagogy, the lecturers developed a more nuanced understanding of how the online learning environments may privilege forms of communication, navigation, and engagement whilst

marginalising others. The insights suggest that professional collaboration, as a form of ongoing pedagogical learning, through which lecturers critically negotiate tensions between inclusive teaching commitments, institutional technological demands, and the realities of students' diversity within the higher education contexts.

What emerges from the analysis is that collaboration extended beyond collegial support and became a critical site of pedagogical reflexivity through which assumptions about participation, accessibility, and inclusive online teaching could be collectively interrogated and reimagined. The collaborative process therefore situated inclusion as a relational, ethical, and design-oriented practice rather than a technical or procedural response to student difference. Collectively, these insights highlight that the significance of the collaboration lay not only in the redesign of the module itself, but in how the process fostered collective pedagogical responsibility and deeper critical engagement with the ethical, relational, and epistemological dimensions of inclusive online education. This process also involved negotiating differing disciplinary perspectives and pedagogical assumptions, which became important in challenging taken-for-granted understandings of participation, support, and online engagement.

4. Concluding Insights and Pedagogical Implications

This paper has demonstrated the importance of professional collaboration in supporting the development of inclusive pedagogical practices within online higher education contexts. Through reflexive dialogue and course redesign, the paper demonstrated how inclusive pedagogy can inform more responsive approaches to digitally mediated teaching and learning that seek to widen epistemological access and support participation for diverse student cohorts.

A key insight that emerged from the analysis is that the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (Florian/Spratt 2013) should not be understood as a prescriptive set of strategies for teaching and learning, but rather as a framework for critically reconsidering pedagogical responsibilities within

online learning environments. This reflective engagement enabled the lecturers to interrogate the assumptions regarding participation, student ability, and digital competencies, whilst foregrounding differences as an expected and ordinary dimension of learning. In doing so, the paper highlighted how inclusive pedagogy provides a means of challenging practices that promote exclusion that may become embedded within digital course design.

The inquiry further suggests that professional collaboration can function as a critical site for pedagogical reflexivity in which lecturers could collectively interrogate and reimagine their pedagogical choices, justifications, and actions. Rather than positioning inclusion as an individual responsibility, this collaborative process alludes to the importance of a shared pedagogical learning in navigating the complexities of online teaching and learning.

Within a broader conceptual level, the paper suggests the need for higher education institutions to promote and support collaborative professional interdisciplinary learning, and inclusive course design within the rapidly evolving online learning environments. Although situated within a particular institutional context, the insights generated through this reflective collaboration may contribute to broader conversations regarding inclusive pedagogy, lecturer agency, and epistemological access within digitally mediated higher education. Inclusive online pedagogy is therefore more than a technical response to student diversity; it is a call to action to ensure ongoing ethical and relational practice underpinned by collaboration and a commitment to widening access for all students.

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6. Short biographies

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Sustainable Higher Education

From Ivory Tower to Responsive Leadership

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Keywords

June 2026

Sustainable higher education, responsiveness, stakeholder engagement, employability, institutional sustainability, student voice, industry expectations

Abstract

In the context of rapid socio-economic and technological change, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly required to move beyond traditional “Ivory Tower” models towards more responsive and sustainable approaches. This study examines the relationship between institutional responsiveness and sustainability, emphasising stakeholder engagement as a critical driver of relevance and resilience in twenty-first century higher education. Historically, HEIs contributed significantly to research, economic development, and social mobility. However, evolving labour market demands and societal expectations have intensified calls for universities to become more agile, socially accountable, and aligned with stakeholder needs. Drawing on a literature review and findings from three stakeholder surveys, the study explores the expectations of students, parents, employers, and communities regarding the role of HEIs.

This article develops a stakeholder-responsive sustainability framework for higher education through the synthesis of two empirical studies and a targeted review of the literature. The first study explored student motivations and expectations when selecting a higher education institution, while the second examined employer expectations regarding graduate employability and workplace readiness. Findings from these studies were analysed alongside literature on stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, employability, and institutional sustainability to identify recurring themes and relationships. The analysis demonstrates that stakeholder perceptions of value, particularly regarding employability, institutional relevance, service quality, belonging, and workplace preparedness, play a critical role in shaping institutional responsiveness. Building on these findings, the article proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how stakeholder voices can be systematically integrated into institutional strategy, curriculum development, and student experience design to promote long-term sustainability.

The article offers a conceptual model that links stakeholder engagement, institutional responsiveness, relevance and sustainability, and provides a tool for higher education leaders seeking to balance educational purpose, employability expectations, and institutional resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is an era of socio-economic and technological transformation, characterised by a rapidly evolving labour market. In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) face the strategic challenge of defining what it means to be relevant and responsive, ensuring institutional sustainability. Historically, universities derived legitimacy from their roles as creators and custodians of knowledge. Today, HEIs are being challenged to reimagine their roles beyond the traditional confines of the “Ivory Tower” and to contribute directly to economic development, social mobility, employability, innovation, and community advancement. Stakeholder engagement, a key driver of relevance and responsiveness, has gained significant traction as organisations recognise that listening to and understanding stakeholder voices ensures their efforts are meaningful, effective, and aligned with the needs and expectations of the people they serve (Kujala, 2022; Singh, 2025). Key stakeholder groups include students, parents, employers, communities, regulators, and societies at large. Among these groups, students and employers occupy particularly influential positions because they shape both demand for educational services and perceptions of graduate success.

Although extensive literature exists on student motivations for accessing higher education and employer expectations regarding graduate employability, these bodies of knowledge are frequently examined independently. As a result, limited guidance exists regarding how institutions might integrate these stakeholder perspectives into a coherent strategy for long-term sustainability. The gap provides the basis for the framework developed in this article.

This article is presented as a conceptual framework paper informed by a secondary synthesis of two empirical research projects and a targeted review of relevant literature. Rather than reporting the findings of the original studies again, the article integrates their insights to develop a stakeholder-responsive sustainability framework for higher education. The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it synthesises student and employer perspectives, which are often treated separately in higher education

scholarship. Second, it proposes a conceptual explanation of the relationship between stakeholder engagement, institutional responsiveness, relevance, and sustainability. Third, it offers a practical framework that can guide higher education leaders in embedding stakeholder voices into institutional planning, curriculum development, and student experience design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Motivations for Higher Education

Stakeholder theory holds that organisations achieve legitimacy and long-term success by recognising and responding to the needs and expectations of those affected by their activities. In higher education, responsiveness is the capacity of institutions to identify, understand, and adapt to stakeholder expectations while remaining faithful to their academic mission.

Over the years, numerous studies have examined student choice and expectations of HEIs (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Yet, as Conti reflects, this remains a topical issue as the higher education landscape continues to evolve. In this context, institutions seek to distinguish themselves from competitors, and institutional sustainability is gaining traction in Council discussions (Conti, 2022, p. 4). Institutional sustainability extends beyond financial viability. Sustainable HEIs are characterised by their ability to remain relevant, adaptive, resilient, and impactful over time. As HEIs compete for enrolments, it is imperative that HEI leaders engage in in-depth studies of how prospective students choose their higher education institution (Hutt, 2019, p. 1; Mubarak, 2020, p. 1). The importance of understanding a student’s choice and motivation is also linked to concomitant expectations, the recognition of value and satisfaction, and the alignment between expectations and actual experiences. All these factors, in turn, strongly correlate with students’ retention and success, another high-priority consideration for higher education (Jackson et al., 2023; Sallai et al., 2023; Hawthorne, 2021; Nowell, 2017; Sogunro, 2014). Edgar et al. (2019:111) make the critical point that by

understanding why students enter higher education, educators and institutions will have a sound guide to influence student outcomes, including sustainable solutions for retaining students in the future.

Every day, consumers make purchasing decisions, and many criteria influence these choices (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1205). Deciding where to enrol for higher education is not a unique “buying” experience, and various factors – internal, external, or in combination - influence the decision. Literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that motivate students’ choices. However, as emphasised by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27), choice is seldom unidimensional. Instead, expectations are multidimensional and complex, as students’ perceptions of the value of university education and of success are often both subjective and objective, influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including values, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and goals (Urbancova & Fajcokova, 2020, p. 27).

Prospective students are ordinary people accustomed to engaging in various activities, which leads to making choices daily. All of them have different needs and wants, and some needs are more pressing than others. A need becomes a motive when it is more pressing, meaning it must be satisfied (Ajzen, 2014, p. 526). The Cambridge Dictionary (Online) defines motivation as the enthusiasm for doing something. In the context of higher education, Hawthorne (2021) and Duta (2015) emphasise the importance of motivation as a driver that helps young adults focus on the key outcome and maintain their attention for extended periods. Motivation may often be the driving force that keeps students going (Hawthorne, 2021; Duta, 2015: 54).

According to Godara and Dua (2021:84), internal and psychological factors that can play a role in buying into higher education include the prospective student’s motivation to study, future career aspirations, specific interest in the institution or qualification, preferences, the perception of the value of the qualification or institution of choice, and where they feel they will fit in. The individual characteristics of a prospective student also play a crucial role in determining where to study.

This can include demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location, personality, and lifestyle (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1205). Cote and Levine (1997:229) identified five critical factors that motivate students to attend higher education: (i) wanting financial success driven by a good job, (ii) meeting the expectations of others, (iii) self-development, (iv) a desire to be a good citizen through helping others, including family and community, and (v) avoiding other less desirable options. The list has since been expanded to include socioeconomic status, parental educational level, first-generation status, race, gender, future income, career aspirations, and the desire to make the family proud as crucial motivations for students entering university (Singh, 2025). Cheng et al. (2021:21-22), however, reinforce Cote and Levine's findings that students see improved job prospects as the most important motivation for undertaking a university degree, and concomitantly call for HEIs to redesign their academic programmes with a greater focus on skills and attributes associated with graduate employability.

Family and social influence: Rani and Reddy (2019:233) and Stalinska (2020: 259) both identify the significant role played by parents in their children's pursuit of higher education, especially in how children are socialised to understand the importance of transitioning into higher education (Xu, Shim, Lotz & Almeida, 2004:92; Yaacob et al., 2014, p. 242; Siah, Ong, Tan, Sim & Thoo, 2017:7). Additionally, Aguado et al. (2015:231) and Proboyo and Soedarsono (2015:2) point out that parental influence can be significant in decision-making, as parents are often the fee-payers for further study. The studies presented by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27) and Zsigmond and Machova (2020) also highlight students' strong desire to meet family expectations as a key motivator for enrolling in higher education, with much less emphasis on impressing friends and educators. That said, the influence of peers, teachers, and community members, especially for prospective students who are first-generation university entrants, cannot be overstated (Alekan et al., 2018, p. 309; Sharif et al., 2019, p. 33; Singh, 2025, pp. 9-10).

Gender: Student gender is also a consideration when evaluating motivation for higher education (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014, p. 391).

According to Baharun et al. (2011:4704), females are much more likely to make choices based on the information they receive from both social connections and institutions. Women also prefer smaller classes, which is not necessarily a priority for men. Regarding the choice of a qualification, Liu and Morgan (2020:177) found that family responsibility and a qualification that would lead to a career enabling them to provide for their families were significantly greater motivators for male student respondents to obtain higher education qualifications. Jansen, Williams, and Latief (2024:33) reported a similar finding in their focused study of students registered for a B.Com in Accounting. Their results showed that while male students were more motivated and guided by the career prospects associated with a B.Com in Accounting qualification, female students enrolled in the B.Com in Accounting programme to broaden their horizons and develop a better understanding of themselves.

Race, Ethnicity, and Socio-Economic Mobility: Montoya and Scott (2013) identified ethnicity as a significant factor in consumer behaviour. Slobodin et al. (2021:12) reported that, among Ethiopian students, respondents' parents and families had materially higher expectations for their children to attend university, especially when higher education qualifications are linked to better social mobility. This finding aligns with the results reported by Jackson et al. (2023: 565) in another study from South Africa. Fongwa (2019:564) provides further context for the South African study, speaking of the so-called "black tax", which refers to the financial obligation placed on Black graduates to support members of their immediate and sometimes extended families.

Another South African study conducted by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020:27), which deliberately segmented respondents into racial groupings to identify whether race and ethnicity informed decision-making when selecting a higher education institution, found that Black students were more socially conscious and that their motivation for entering higher education was strongly influenced by how it could be applied to give back to their communities and families.

However, limiting motivations to study to race and ethnicity may be short-sighted. The opportunity for socio-economic mobility is a recognised motivator for pursuing higher education. Poverty, social class, economic climate, and family income are all factors that can influence a prospective student's decision to pursue a career path that will improve their long-term prospects, notes Borchert (2002:2).

Lifestyle: Lifestyle also affects the buying behaviours of prospective students. Lifestyle refers to the way of living within a society. It can be expressed by the things in his/her surroundings (Utama, 2021, p. 19). Lifestyle can include activities, hobbies, and patterns that an individual lives by, and can be expressed through opinions, interests, and activities (Utama, 2021, p. 19). It can further include the status groups to which they belong, past experiences, their values, where they live, their social class and social standing in the community, as well as their appearance (Utama, 2021, p. 19). As one respondent in the current study noted, “It was important for us to look for the best, a reputable institution that fits in with the social class of my family” – Participant 3. Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides (2011:89) reported that social class strongly affects the decision-making process when choosing an institution to study at (Azzone & Soncin, 2019:1). When prospective students are looking for a higher education institution, they will consider whether the institution suits their lifestyle and personality (Godara & Dua, 2021:84). Another lifestyle-linked factor that impacts choice is the student’s financial position, specifically whether they can afford to study. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the communities in the vicinity of the institution, as well as the expectations of students and parents.

Institutional location and brand: The location of the higher education institution plays a significant role in deciding where to study, as many parents and prospective students for whom financial wherewithal is a material consideration will look for a “local” institution (Siah, Ong, Tan, Sim & Thoo, 2017:1). Understanding students’ motivations will enable the institution to develop its brand and strategy in response to students’ demands and expectations, building meaningful stakeholder connections in the vicinity of the institution. For parents and students to be fully

invested as “consumers” and to consider the institution, they also want confirmation that the institutional brand is reliable and can be trusted to meet their needs and interests (Fetscherin & Heilmann, 2015, p. 10).

Perception of value: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005:213) state that perceived value can be understood as what is received versus what is given (Pham et al., 2018, p. 3). Perceived value is a key driver of purchase decisions. Analogously, the institutional brand and reputation of the academic programme will always be a strong motivating factor, as students invest in their future by deciding to study at a specific institution. They are paying for the curriculum, the student journey, and the advantages they believe will be associated with enrolling in the institution of their choice (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 711). Prospective students have a perception of the value they will receive when they enroll in a particular institution; however, the actual value for money will only be evident later, after they have commenced the student journey. Institutions must be mindful of the mantra of promises made and promises kept, as material reputational damage can result from students who believe they have been misled. In higher education, one of the most significant marketing tools is word of mouth. Corroborating this, Saleem et al. (2017:237) and Weerasinghe and Fernando (2017:533) point out that student satisfaction is singularly dependent on the overlap between student expectations and the realisation of their needs.

2.2 Understanding Industry Expectations in the Context of Value and Employability

Expectations of higher education have undergone seismic shifts, and the debate about its purpose continues, especially as the global higher education sectoral agenda increasingly emphasises the need to prepare graduates for the workplace. Summarising the evolving landscape, Tight (2023:551) positions higher education today as only a means to an end (gainful employment). This contrasts with earlier conceptions of higher education, when tertiary study was an end in itself, with the sole focus on preparing intellectually well-rounded individuals. Historically, as

described by Newman (1852), the university was a communal, residential home for teaching and advancing universal knowledge. It served as a “kind of finishing school for young gentlemen” (Tight, 2023, p. 552; Cheng, 2021, p. 17). The responsibility for developing workplace skills lay with the employer.

Debates about the changing legitimization of higher education gained traction in the latter part of the twentieth century, as the goals of enhancing employability and graduates' personal and professional development throughout their careers were increasingly foregrounded. Re-envisioning the higher education complex for future-proofing was robustly discussed at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998), when the Promethean change of integrating the world of work and skills into tertiary curricula was advocated and adopted. In the 21st century, the unequivocal expectation is that HEIs become more than places of knowledge creation and dissemination. “Employability has become a key concept in higher education globally” (Cheng et al., 2021, p. 16).

Worldwide, HEIs are being called upon to redefine themselves because an academic qualification alone is no longer sufficient to access a job in the competitive workplace (Richardt et al., 2024). Confirming this view, Muurlink et al. (2024:953), in their study of doctoral graduates and employability success, found that while doctoral graduates “appear on the surface to offer a natural fit to industry jobs ... their employment may not be commensurate with the length, quality or nature of their educational training.” Muurlink et al. (2024:959) attribute this discrepancy to the fact that, while graduates highlighted research skills and technical knowledge as the top-ranked requirements for employability, industry stated that teamwork and collaboration are the most valued skills.

Cogently linking graduate employability to perceptions of value, O'Neill and Short (2025:24) describe employability in today's world as “a moral duty for higher education providers”, arguing that students invest time and money in their studies, with most anticipating that their qualification will lead to enhanced workplace success. In this context, Bakare (2017:14) notes that it is generally accepted that the role of a higher education

institution is to prepare work-ready graduates, helping individuals develop their knowledge and skills through education, thereby enabling them to contribute to the economy and ultimately create a prosperous and diverse nation. It has thus become increasingly common for HEIs to integrate skills and employability competencies, particularly at the undergraduate level, note Cheng et al. (2021:16). “This is a deliberate shift in focus from producing an intellectual class of higher-level thinkers to one of professional training for diverse employment opportunities,” state Richardt et al. (2024:562).

“To thrive in today’s innovation-driven economy, workers require a different set of skills compared with those in the past. In addition to foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, they need competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, and character qualities such as persistence, curiosity, and initiative. Changes in the labour market have heightened the need for all individuals, not just a few, to have these skills (World Economic Forum, 2015). In addition, other key employability skills and workplace competencies explicitly highlighted by employers include time management, critical thinking, adaptability, resilience, and innovation (Richardt et al., 2024, p. 566; Bhardwa, 2021; Allden et al., 2018).

The same or similar skill sets and rankings as presented in the World Economic Forum (2016) list are repeated across the literature. While the World Economic Forum has sought to define some of the skills and competencies (World Economic Forum, 2016), the academic dilemma remains the absence of a clear, shared, precise definition for each of the skills, raising questions about whether employer surveys and responses refer to the same activities (Hinchcliffe, 2007; Muurlink et al., 2024, p. 961). Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly challenging to specify what HEIs should include in their curriculum development. Confirming this challenge, the study by Khoo et al. (2020) highlighted a significant dissonance between what academic staff consider the most critical skills for graduates and what employers deem critical. This was also identified by Allden et al (2018:1), who reflect on the “mismatch between what employers expect from graduates and what is provided by

university education.” Outcomes like this reinforce the need for more explicit, shared definitions and reaffirm the absolute necessity for HEIs to continually engage with employer voices in curriculum development and programme review processes, as institutions respond to the employability discourse generally, and industry cultures specifically (Muurlink, 2024, p. 961; Chen et al., 2020).

While the emphasis on workplace readiness in the expressed curriculum continues to grow, a further challenge confronting HEIs is the recognition that something will be lost, “mostly the discipline or subject being studied, or at least the scope and depth of it that can be studied: ...” (Tight, 2023, p. 562). As identified by Speight et al. (2013:112), academics and students are already raising concerns that the contemporary focus on learning for employment negatively affects the transfer of essential discipline knowledge. Institutional responsiveness must, therefore, always include the following considerations:

- (i) What are the necessary skills that employers expect from graduates?
- (ii) What are the personal attributes that employers expect?
- (iii) What specific knowledge does the industry expect?

Furthermore, addressing the triad of relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability, higher education institutions must still strike a balance in fostering the values essential to holistic student development, including social responsibility and responsible citizenship.

3. Research Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual framework development approach informed by a secondary synthesis of two previously completed empirical studies and a targeted review of literature. The purpose is not to re-analyse primary data but to integrate findings from complementary stakeholder groups to develop a broader explanatory framework. Both informing studies focused on the views of strategically identified higher education stakeholders – students and

employers. The two studies were selected because they examined stakeholder groups central to institutional sustainability.

The first study engaged with prospective and first-year students (“the student voice research project”), while the second focused on industry as an employer and investigated employer expectations regarding graduate employability and workplace readiness (“the industry stakeholder research project”). Both studies examined factors critical to the responsiveness and sustainability of HEIs. The student voice research project focused on students' (and their parents') motivations for accessing a higher education institution and their expectations once enrolled. In contrast, the second study examined industry views on the competency expectations for graduate employability.

3.1 The student voice research project

According to Creswell (2017:61), research design refers to the approach used to conduct the research and answer the research questions. It serves as a link between the research questions and the study's implementation. With specific reference to qualitative research, Flick (2018:6-8) explains that it focuses on participants in their natural settings, where their values, beliefs, behaviours, and interpretations are systematically observed to produce reliable and trustworthy information. According to Mohajan (2018:23), qualitative research is the most suitable approach for investigating these variables. This study, therefore, employed a qualitative approach to examine the motivations of South African students to pursue higher education. The qualitative research method enabled the collection of information on the experiences and perceptions of participants in their natural settings (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022:13), focusing on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ rather than on the numbers. The qualitative approach to the study allowed for the development of themes and created a space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

The study centred on exploring the factors that contribute to the decision-making process regarding the choice of a higher education institution for tertiary studies. The intention was to identify the key choice factors, assess their importance, and determine how institutions can utilise this information

to become the first-choice institution when students need to decide where to study. Structured interviews were used to gather information from the participants. The research utilised primary data generated by the participants, adding trustworthiness and quality to the study. The findings reflect the respondents' unadulterated responses. The respondent sample was representative of the target population. The researcher used non-probability, convenience sampling for the study. The participants included fourteen Grade 12 students currently in the process of choosing their HEI, and ten participants who had completed the decision-making process and were currently studying at their preferred institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis using Microsoft Teams. The same set of questions was used in all the interviews. Students' participation in the study was anonymous and entirely voluntary, and the necessary consent was obtained in all cases. The research process involved collecting and analysing data to answer the research questions. Interviews were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams and the researcher's mobile phone. Handwritten notes were taken to ensure further compliance with the norms for data integrity, security, and preservation outlined by Akinyode and Khan (2018: 166).

3.2 The Industry Stakeholder Research Project

The study gathered the views of industry respondents using a web-based online survey questionnaire. Industry participants were asked to rate specific factors and then identify the drivers that would ensure the relevance of a qualification for employability. The study aimed to identify the factors on which the industry, as a primary-category stakeholder, focuses when evaluating the suitability of graduates for the workplace. The findings reflect the input of 53 respondents ($n = 53$) who finally participated in the study.

This study was a more systematic investigation designed to quantify data, enabling the researchers to test their hypotheses, identify patterns, and determine relationships between variables using statistical tools. Consequently, this study employed a quantitative research method. Creswell and Creswell (2018) confirm the appropriateness of this approach, highlighting that the primary value of quantitative research lies in its ability to generate generalisable findings from large sample sizes, offering

objectivity, replicability, and precision in data analysis. In this context, Lim (2023:1) points out, “Quantitative research serves as the cornerstone of evidence-based decision-making. Its importance cannot be overstated: quantitative methods provide empirical rigor, enabling [researchers] to derive actionable insights from data.”

Once a sufficient (saturated) sample was collected, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, and tabular summaries of the survey data were prepared. Each rating in the survey was treated as a dependent variable to draw conclusions about respondents' views on the drivers that would contribute to the continued relevance of the presented curricula and qualifications. Data quality was ensured through analyses of reliability, validity, and structural integrity.

3.3 This Study

By conducting a comprehensive literature review and consolidating empirical findings from two stakeholder studies, this paper examines the views of critical stakeholders in the higher education community regarding the motivations for and expectations of higher education institutions in the 21st century. The blended approach enabled a more holistic and integrated understanding of the issues and, concomitantly, more valuable recommendations. Both informing studies received the necessary organisational ethics clearance.

3.4 Framework Development Process

The Framework was developed in a 5-stage process:

- Stage 1: Identification of key concepts in literature, including stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, employability, relevance, and sustainability.
- Stage 2: Reviewing the findings from the student voice study, which highlighted employability, affordability, reputation, service quality, belonging, and perceived value.

- Stage 3: Reviewing the findings from the employer study, which highlighted workplace readiness, digital proficiency, adaptability, communication skills, and critical thinking.
- Stage 4: Thematic synthesis of recurring concepts across both studies and literature.
- Stage 5: Integration of themes into a conceptual framework explaining relationships between stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, relevance, and sustainability.

4. Study Findings and Discussion

The higher education landscape in South Africa has become increasingly competitive, with more institutions entering the market each year. Institutions compete by seeking to add value for their target market and ultimately attract more students. Institutions must identify market needs by understanding their target market's buying behaviour (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014, p. 392; Wiese, 2008, p. 3). As discussed in the literature, prospective students can be viewed as consumers, individuals who purchase products or services offered to them. The decision to buy is often complex, with several stages in the decision-making process. These stages should be understood by both prospective students and institutions (Zain et al., 2013, p. 75; Wiese et al., 2010, p. 150; Manoku, 2015, p. 253), as they enable institutions to develop responsive strategies and understand the possibilities of future repurchasing (Chopra, 2020, p. 3). During the interviews, it was interesting to see how participants progressed through the different stages of the decision-making process and employed various methods and sources to guide them. Chopra (2020:3) classifies the consumer decision process into the following five stages:

Problem recognition: This is when the consumer realises there is a need or desire. In this study, the prospective student aims to pursue further education to obtain a qualification they believe is crucial for future employment (Rees, 2020, p. 12).

Search for information: The prospective student begins gathering information about tertiary institutions and the qualifications they offer, ultimately to resolve the problem at hand. Without this research, a decision

could not be made. They utilise various information sources to gather data that informs their decision-making.

Evaluation of alternatives: After completing the research, the prospective student evaluated all available options. This involved comparing institutions to identify the best alternative. Various factors were considered, and the main goal was to find the best place that would fulfil their needs.

Final decision: The student then made the decision once all the information had been gathered and evaluated. Students had certain expectations, and once they felt that these expectations could be met, they could proceed with enrolment at the institution.

Post-purchase decisions: Once the student “bought into” the institution of choice, they experienced varying levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. They evaluated their choice and considered what the outcome would have been if they had chosen a different institution. It is therefore vital that the student’s expectations (“value”) are met to ensure a positive educational journey.

Research study 1: Understanding students' motivations in selecting a higher education institution

This study examines the factors that motivate prospective students’ decisions when selecting a higher education institution, which is critical to understanding the student market. By understanding who is interested in the institution and why, the institution can not only improve its recruitment efforts but also enhance its curriculum and student journeys to better respond to students’ expectations (Dame: 2020:280; Haslerig, 2021:171). The research focused on personal factors, internal/psychological factors, social influences, and cultural influences, and the responses reported were linked to three critical questions discussed with the participants:

1. What made an institution your first choice HEI?
2. Did you consider the factor of value that would be derived from the institution?
3. Did you experience any pressure from family or friends to choose this institution?

1. What made an institution your first choice HEI?

Eight respondents stated that their choice of institution was based on whether the institution offered what they wanted to study.

Participant 24 said that his choice was predicated on a desire to follow in his mother’s footsteps, and the institution allowed him to do this.

Participants 3, 7, 8, 17, 21, 22, and 23 said the choice was made because of geographic location and proximity to home. The location made it very convenient for them to consider the institution their top choice. Participant 21 did not attend his first-choice institution because he would have had to relocate and the cost would have been too high. He settled on his second choice and was very excited to be closer to home while still getting the same qualification. He also stated, “I did my research, and I attended the open day on campus. I could then see that the institution has a good reputation, and I enjoyed the culture on campus.”

Participant 2 said the following: “As a student from abroad, I looked at multiple institutions. Even though I had the option to pick and choose, I chose this institution due to the personal service that I got as well as their affordable fees.”

Participant 12 indicated that she revised her first-choice institution after attending their open day. She was unimpressed with the service she received and selected another institution.

Approximately 42% of respondents indicated that campus life, including its social activities, was a significant factor in their decision to attend a particular institution. Studies by Hawthorne (2021) and Cengage (2023) also identified the emphasis students place on a cohesive culture, a sense of community, and opportunities for personal interactions, particularly those that occur outside the classroom. Discussing the campus experience as a motivating factor, Doan (2021:251) states that higher education is viewed as a service to

students. Therefore, it is crucial to provide them with quality education, user-friendly facilities, and a positive student environment that makes them happy and comfortable. Additionally, Green (2014:947) emphasises the importance of service quality as a key factor in the campus experience, both before and during the student journey, in recruiting and retaining students, especially in a competitive market.

“The welcoming feeling I experienced during a consultation at one of their campuses influenced my decision to study at this institution. The billboards around the campus also convinced me to take a look, but it was the personalised service that sold it to me.” – Participant 3

“I went to an open day at another institution, and I was not impressed. I then changed my mind and decided to attend another institution where I felt I belonged. ... I realised at the open day that it is where I want to be. They promised value, and I also got positive feedback from students studying at the institution.” – Participant 12

“The qualifications on offer played a role as well as the open day attended. It made me feel welcome, and the staff were really friendly.” – Participant 14

Financial wherewithal and affordability were also considerations in determining institutional choice, but the impact of price on the final decision varied.

“As a student from abroad, I looked at multiple institutions. Even though I had the option to pick and choose, I chose this institution due to the personal service that I got as well as their affordable fees.” – Participant 2

“I chose the institution and qualification without having the fees impact my decision.” – Participant 4

“The financial considerations did play a role in my decision because if the fees were unreasonable, I would have decided otherwise.” – Participant 5

“I see this as an investment in my future.” – Participant 16

“My family could afford to send me anywhere, but I chose this institution as it was cheaper, closer, and offered bursaries.” – Participant 21

2. Did you consider the factor of value that would be derived from the institution?

Most participants considered the institution's value before enrolling. They stated that they had done their research beforehand. Their choices were based on whether they felt comfortable with the institution and its qualifications, and on whether they thought they would get value for their money.

The quality of service received from the institution was a significant factor in all respondents' decision-making.

Participant 3 said that he was impressed during his initial visit to the campus of choice, which gave him the impression that it was an institution that strives to deliver high-value services and qualifications.

“I saw the billboards around the institution's one campus and decided to go and have a look. I attended an interview with a student advisor on campus, and it was very impressive. I knew that this was where I wanted to be.” – Participant 3

92% of the Participants defined value through an employability lens.

Participant 3 said that the qualifications at his institution were well regarded by industry and that he knew that he would not struggle with employment once he had obtained his qualification. “I am excited to know that I can step into the world of work one day, as the industry recognises this qualification.” – Participant 3

Participant 6 stated that she was seeking an institution with a more practical approach, and she chose her institution for this reason. She needed to gain practical experience and skills to apply in her industry one day. “I researched the institution’s website and saw that this institution offered the qualification in a practical way, where I can learn the necessary skills to implement in the industry. That is what I wanted. I was also referred by a friend of mine, who attended the institution.” – Participant 6

“I was very happy that the qualification combines modules that I can apply in my work one day. This made my choice an easy one as I felt like I would get value for my money.” – Participant 15

Participant 16 indicated that she was happy to hear that the institution she chose has practical hours built into the qualification. In her opinion, this would add value, as she would gain work experience while still a student and it would also help her with future work opportunities.

Participant 8 also noted that she was looking for an institution that offered contact learning. “I wanted to study Architecture only, and this institution is world-recognised for its Architecture qualification.”

Participant 11 was impressed by the institution’s statistics and growth, and she knew she would find value in future career opportunities.

Participant 23 stated that she was especially impressed to hear that the qualifications at her preferred institution are internationally recognised. She was excited to learn that she would be able to continue working or pursue further studies overseas. The international linkage was reiterated by Participants 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20, who stated that once they completed their research, it was reassuring to know that

their institutions were legitimate and accredited and also offered international opportunities upon completion of their qualifications.

The literature on intrinsic motivation in HEI choice confirms that ambition and career prospects are significant motivators in students’ decisions (Singh, 2025; Cengage, 2023). In Singh’s (2025) research, 100% of respondents from the 2024 cohort sample ranked ambition and future goals as their first driver when choosing a HEI, and in this context, almost 80% noted an expectation that the HEI would provide opportunities and prepare them for the world of work. Those respondents who had not applied an institutional value to their deliberations believed that the value of attending a specific institution would only become evident once they were enrolled and had started classes there.

From the respondents who have already enrolled in higher education studies:

Participant 2 emphasised the skills taught at this institution, which he believed would be helpful in industry.

Participant 9 stated the following: “The lecturers prepare you for the industry, and they show you the various industry opportunities.” He also felt confident knowing that he would be employed once he completed his course.

Participant 12 believed that the practical element of her qualification would one day help her find a job and achieve success.

3. Social influences: Did you experience any pressure from family or friends to choose this institution?

Human beings aggregate in social groups, and the groups to which people belong often influence their choices, perceptions, and decisions (Qazzafi, 2020, p. 1207). Pressure from peers, family, and friends can be challenging for students making decisions about higher education and can affect their perceptions, dreams, and career paths. On the other hand, being part of a caring social network can support the transition from high school to tertiary studies. Factors relevant to this grouping include community and peer influence, as well as parental influence. For example, parents may attend

specific institutions and want their child to attend them as well, or they may want their child to study something they themselves wanted to study, even though it might not be the student's first choice (Stalinska, 2020, p. 359). In the current study, just more than one-third of respondents (9) answered this question affirmatively, and most attributed the pressure to family influences.

Participant 5 was rejected by her first-choice institution and was given the option to either enrol with this institution or not pursue any tertiary studies. She felt pressured to enrol at the institution to continue studying.

Participants 8, 11, and 22 felt pressure to study, but not necessarily about where to study. Participant 22 commented: "Everyone in my family studied, and I felt pressure as most of them are in an engineering career, which in itself is already pressure."

Participants 17 and 18 felt pressured by people in their immediate environment, who were constantly talking about the institution, which affected their choice.

"People in my surroundings were always having something to say about this institution, and I felt pressured to choose this institution. Luckily, the qualification that I wanted to do was offered here, so the choice was still my own." – Participant 18

Several participants who answered negatively, while acknowledging the freedom to choose, also recognised the influence of social factors. For example, Participants 4 and 6 stated that although their institutional choice was their own, they knew people who had attended the institution, which made their choice easier. Other respondents stated:

"I heard people talking about the institution. They were so passionate about the brand that it sucked me in".
– Participant 10

"The good reputation of the institution and good referrals did play a role in my decision." – Participant 19

Participant responses were mixed regarding students’ knowledge and understanding of higher education. All students agreed they wanted to study, but while some knew where they wanted to study, others were uncertain about what they wanted to study, and others knew what they wanted to study but were unsure about where to go. They were therefore more dependent on recommendations from their social network (word of mouth).

Research Project 2: Industry voices engaging with graduate employability and workplace readiness

The second research project relevant to this discussion examined industry responses to students’ work readiness, including expectations of higher education. For this study, work readiness describes a graduate’s preparedness, in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, to transition into and perform effectively in the workplace. It encompasses technical competencies relevant to a specific job and essential soft skills. Work readiness reflects an individual’s ability to meet employers’ expectations and to contribute meaningfully to the workplace.

Table 1 summarises the top five recommendations from employer respondents to enhance graduate workplace readiness, based on their experiences and the challenges identified in practice.

Table 1: Graduate Workplace Readiness

Challenges Identified	Recommendations
Lack of hands-on experience and practical workplace preparation.	Expand real-world experience and industry exposure.
Gaps in critical thinking and the ability to address complex, real-world challenges.	Enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
Limited proficiency in current and emerging workplace technologies.	Strengthen digital and technological proficiency.
Weak professional communication skills are unsuitable for workplace interactions.	Develop workplace communication skills.

Mixed feedback on meeting technical knowledge requirements while addressing workplace readiness skills.	Maintain discipline-specific knowledge while addressing skill gaps.
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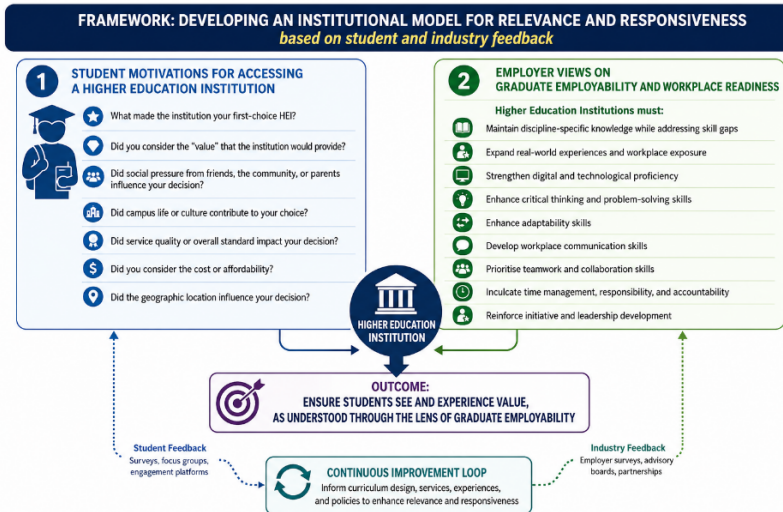
Data subjects were also asked to rank the top 5 curriculum improvement areas that would enhance graduates’ employability and preparedness for the demands of modern careers, with 1 being the highest ranking. Digital and technological proficiency was ranked as the top area for curriculum improvement.

Table 2: Curriculum improvement areas to promote graduate employability

Curriculum improvement areas	Index
<i>Cultural awareness and global mindset:</i> Offer courses or modules focused on global and cultural competence to prepare students for diverse work environments.	5.10
<i>Ethics and professionalism:</i> Build ethical decision-making and professionalism into coursework.	15.29
<i>Leadership and initiative:</i> Include leadership development courses or modules that emphasise initiative-taking, decision-making, and responsibility	29.30
<i>Soft skills development:</i> Emphasise communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills through group projects, presentations, and peer evaluations.	29.94
<i>Time management and resilience under pressure:</i> Implement exercises or assignments with tight deadlines and project constraints, simulating workplace pressures	31.85
<i>Workplace adaptability and flexibility:</i> Foster adaptability through courses that address navigating change, agile thinking, and project management	32.48

<i>Receptiveness to feedback and continuous improvement: Include feedback-oriented assignments where students are assessed and given opportunities to improve and resubmit work</i>	33.12
<i>Entrepreneurial skills and innovation: Incorporate modules on entrepreneurship, design thinking, and innovation to encourage creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.</i>	38.22
<i>Industry-specific certifications: Offer optional or integrated certifications in relevant industry areas (e.g., project management, data analytics, digital marketing)</i>	47.77
<i>Real-world experience and industry exposure: Expand internship programs, cooperative education, and project-based learning with industry partners</i>	56.05
<i>Critical thinking and problem-solving: Embed case studies, simulations, and scenario-based learning to help students tackle complex, real-world challenges.</i>	87.26
<i>Digital and technological proficiency: Strengthen training on current industry-standard software, digital tools, and emerging technologies (e.g., data analytics, AI, project management software)</i>	100.00

Drawing together the data from the student survey, which engaged with feedback on student motivations for accessing higher education generally and higher education institutions specifically, and the express finding that respondents expected to see value linked to employability; and the industry survey, which summarises employers’ opinions on the factors that enhance workplace readiness and, by extension, employability, a framework for relevance and responsiveness in higher education is presented below. In line with the notion of a framework, it does not provide a comprehensive solution (this should be clear from the study limitation, namely that only intrinsic factors were assessed) but instead offers a basis of reusable components upon which HEIs can build, rather than always starting from scratch.



[Diagram developed with the assistance of ChatGPT]

This study holds significant strategic value for higher education institutions seeking to ensure their relevance and sustainability by recognising the need for responsiveness. Analysis revealed a strong convergence between student and employer expectations. Although the stakeholder groups differed in focus, both emphasised value creation through meaningful educational experiences and successful graduate outcomes. Students largely defined value in terms of employability, career advancement, service quality, institutional reputation, and belonging. Employers emphasised workplace readiness, practical experience, communication skills, technological competence, and adaptability. By understanding the perspectives of key stakeholders, institutions can design informed, targeted interventions that support and respond to the needs of students, their parents, and the expectations of what constitutes good value in higher education. Stakeholder voices shape perceptions of value, which should influence institutional responsiveness. Responsive HEIs will align curricula and student experiences with the stakeholder expectations, thereby enhancing graduate employability. Enhanced employability strengthens institutional relevance, which contributes to long-term institutional sustainability. Sustainability is

reinforced through continuous stakeholder engagement and feedback, creating an iterative cycle of improvement and adaptation. Effectively responding to stakeholder (student) expectations functions as a mediating mechanism between their expectations and their satisfaction. Additionally, the study provides a sound foundation for developing a robust curriculum framework that ensures value is achieved through graduate employability. The framework further highlights the pivotal role of employability as a contemporary expression of value. While employability should not displace broader educational purposes, the findings indicate that students and employers increasingly regard graduate outcomes as an important measure of institutional effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

Although demand for higher education has grown in recent years, so too has the number of institutions (Bakare, 2017, p. 14). The industry has become increasingly competitive. Students accessing higher education have certain expectations, and institutions can only be responsive to stakeholder expectations once they understand them. Probably the only unequivocal statement about higher education is that nothing about it remains static. That said, institutions cannot be expected to respond to every change. To be relevant and sustainable, institutions must strategically identify and prioritise actions that will have the greatest influence on their primary stakeholders and respond directly to them. Acknowledging the caution raised by Urbancova and Fajcokova (2020) about institutions being led solely by stakeholder voices, understanding stakeholder expectations, preferences for participation, and drivers of engagement must be key considerations in laying the foundation for institutional sustainability. Supporting this principle, Ham et al. (2021:62) and Polas et al. (2020:1050) note that a satisfied student will have a positive attitude towards their institution and will complete their studies there, thereby positively influencing retention and success. For example, aligning the student journey with workplace relevance and facilitating skills development for an effective transition into the workplace are undoubtedly among the expectations gaining emphasis among students.

Engagements with industry and the integration of skills into the tertiary curriculum constitute a paradigm shift for higher education, which some argue changes the legitimating idea of higher education from “a social institution aimed at the related notion of education and knowledge as a public good, to an industry with the related notion of a private good ...” (Nokkala, 2007, p. 255). Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021:25) caution that an overemphasis on employability promotes a culture of consumerism, in which economic return becomes the primary driver of how students perceive the value of higher education, with diminishing recognition of the values of social responsibility and active citizenship. Balancing these competing interests in the contemporary competitive higher education landscape and ensuring relevance and responsiveness (or “value”) will be critical for the sustainability of HEIs.

Stakeholder voices are a critical input to future strategies and planning for any higher education institution, as well as to the development of marketing tools to attract and retain students. By ensuring positive student experiences, we are more likely to retain them. Long-term loyalty will be a definite outcome (Omeregic et al., 2018, p. 7). This positive perception will make students more likely to spread the word and influence those around them, thereby increasing the institution's reputation, market potential, and, consequently, organisational sustainability. Achieving organisational sustainability in a HEI requires a strategic balance between economic viability, customer needs, and stakeholder expectations. It involves careful consideration of priorities and decisions that ensure long-term resilience and relevance. By aligning purpose with practice, HEIs can innovate responsibly, adapt to evolving challenges, and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable future.

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7. Short biographies

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Rethinking Sustainable Integrity Practices: Ethical AI Use in Higher Education through Panellists' Lived Experiences

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Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, AI guardrails, ethics, panellist, panel discussion methods, qualitative approach, single case study design

Abstract

This study explores panellists' understanding of AI guardrails and the challenges they identify, to inform better strategies for ethical and responsible AI use in academia. The research adopts Sociotechnical Systems Theory as its primary approach, these frameworks help analyse interactions between people and technology, as well as the processes by which ethical decisions are made. The study uses a qualitative single-case design, focusing on a panel discussion to examine key issues related to AI safeguards and the importance of ethical AI use. NVivo was used to analyse the data and identify themes. The findings show that panellists view AI guardrails as tools for protecting systems, securing information, monitoring unethical behaviour, and ensuring that institutions follow rules. Based on these findings, the study suggests implications for higher education to support robust ethical governance and responsible AI use.

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1. Introduction

This discussion focuses on a key question: Why is ethics so important to humanity? Ethics shapes who we are, guides how we interact, and supports fairness and respect in our relationships. It helps us distinguish right from wrong, encourages peaceful living, and protects human dignity.

As Langlois et al. (2025, p.2) note: “*Ethics is a complex human concept anchored in cultural norms, values and social beliefs.*” Therefore, the importance of ethics lies in ensuring AI is developed and used responsibly, protecting privacy, fairness, transparency, and accountability, upholding human rights, and preventing harm or bias.

Bringing this sentiment to the ethical foundation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is both necessary and urgent. As AI and machine learning systems play a greater role in decisions that affect people’s lives, their impact on society grows. These technologies are no longer neutral tools; they influence social, economic, and educational outcomes. Therefore, ethics must guide the development and use of AI. Ethics supports fairness, respect, and accountability; helps prevent AI from exacerbating existing biases and inequalities; and promotes transparency, accountability, and human rights. By putting ethics and humanity at the centre of AI, we can ensure technology advances in line with human values and helps build a fairer society.

Studies have reported that the exponential rise of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools in higher education has deeply altered teaching, learning, student support, and assessment practices (Farrokhnia et al, 2025; Kaouni et al., 2025). While these technologies deliver considerable benefits, they also entail serious risks of academic dishonesty and unethical behaviour. To reduce these risks, some HEIs have implemented AI safety measures, such as detection tools, proctoring systems, and plagiarism checks, to protect the integrity of online assessments.

Semantically, a guardrail could be understood as a set of protective boundaries to prevent harm, shape human behaviour and enforce a system within permissible risk limits. An AI guardrail is a tool that provides guidance, safety and support for sustainable integrity by helping students and staff to use AI responsibly. On the other hand, gatekeeping may create

resistance, inequality or even push misuse underground. Gatekeeping is the exclusion of others from participating in an event or from controlling access to the event or to information in an enterprise data system. This paper focuses on AI guardrails. Empirically, Mishra (2025, p.2) conceptualised that:

“AI guardrails are structured mechanisms—spanning technical, ethical, and regulatory dimensions—that keep artificial intelligence systems aligned with defined standards and societal values.”

Studies also describe AI guardrails as essential policies that include rules, regulations, technical limits, and ethical guidelines to protect data, privacy, and security (Clark et al., 2025; Dev et al., 2025; Kumar, 2026; Mulahuwaish et al., 2025). AI guardrails focus on safety and fairness, ensuring accountability, supporting transparency, and maintaining security. In this sense, an AI guardrail is a safety and cybersecurity measure built on policies, rules, and guidelines to detect and protect personal data from unethical actions. AI guardrails are suggested as ways to encourage responsible use by adding ethical, technical, and procedural protections. However, there is still little research on how key stakeholders, especially expert panellists, understand and view these guardrails.

Recent evidence indicates no common or clear understanding of what AI guardrails are or how they help maintain academic integrity (Mishra, 2025; Mulahuwaish et al., 2025). This uncertainty makes it harder to implement AI guardrails due to challenges across institutions, technologies, and teaching methods, potentially limiting their effectiveness in supporting ethical and responsible academic practices. The lack of clear and consistent approaches creates a gap between what AI guardrails are meant to do and how they are actually used in higher education.

An article in The Conversation by Rebecca Davis (2025) reported a major concern about a cheating crisis involving AI technologies in South African universities. Davis (2025) reported:

“Now, they face an insidious new challenge: across the country, students are using ChatGPT and other increasingly sophisticated large language models (LLMs) to generate

essays, solve assignments, and cheat their way through their degrees. The institutions are scrambling to find ways to either stop them or harness the use of AI as a positive academic tool” (p.2).

Specifically, studies have revealed that:

- Students increasingly use AI to generate assignments, reducing authentic student work (Davis, 2025; Jonas, 2024; Nasution & Fransiska, 2026).
- Detection of AI-produced content is becoming unreliable as technologies advance (Boutadjine et al., 2025; Elkhatat et al., 2023).
- Universities are struggling to respond effectively, bringing about inconsistent policies, unclear guidelines, and uneven enforcement (Zhai, 2024).
- Excessive dependence on flawed AI-detection tools causes concerns about fairness and credibility (Giray, 2024; Jonas, 2024; Zhai, 2024).

Recently, the South African Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies gazetted the Draft National AI Policy for public comment, but three days later retracted it amid an outcry over “fabricated citations” that misrepresented the policy (Tembo, 2026). The draft National AI Policy represented a constructive step toward addressing the unethical use of large language models. However, the inclusion of “fake sources” undermined its ethical integrity, procedural validity, and technical credibility. As a result, the Minister withdrew the document, referred it to the Parliament Portfolio Committee Communications for revision, and indicated that it would be republished for public comment (Slimi & Chichti, 2026).

Although many people see these challenges, higher education institutions (HEIs) respond differently to protecting academic integrity as AI use increases. Some are proactive, building AI guardrails into their policies, training staff, and planning for ethical risks. Others only react after problems occur, leading to inconsistent, sometimes confusing policies for staff and

students. Many institutions are still not fully ready to protect academic integrity in environments where AI is common. Even though research points out both the benefits and risks of AI in education, there is still no comprehensive, institution-wide framework for AI governance. Most South African institutions do not treat academic integrity as a shared responsibility, and there is little coordination between policies, teaching, and technical controls (Davis, 2025; Giray et al (2025). As a result, research and actions are fragmented and do not cover all the challenges to academic integrity in the age of AI. There is still a significant gap between the widespread use of AI in higher education and the lack of integrated frameworks for managing its ethical use. (Maleki, 2026)

Within the context of this study, the College of Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) launched the Digitalisation Project as part of the university’s strategic focus on AI and digitalisation. As a project coordinator and member, I planned, hosted and participated in several webinars on Navigating Ethical Challenges: The Role of AI in Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Prevention (May 12, 2025). This project is part of the College Strategic Objectives to advance one of UNISA’s catalytic niche areas, AI and Digitalisation.

This study explores panellists’ understanding and perceptions of AI guardrails, as well as the challenges they identify, to inform better strategies for promoting ethical and responsible AI use in academic environments. These panellists are from Southern African universities who agreed to participate in the webinar. Based on this aim, the following specific research questions (SRQs) are formulated:

- SRQ1: How do panellists conceptualise and interpret the function of AI guardrails in preventing unethical practices?
- SRQ2: How do panellists perceive the role of AI guardrails in providing ethical, technical, and procedural safeguards to protect academic integrity?
- SRQ3: How do panellists describe the challenges associated with implementing AI guardrails to ensure responsible and compliant academic practices?

The subsequent sections present the study's theoretical framework, detail the mechanisms of AI guardrails, describe the empirical research design, report the findings, and conclude with specific implications for AI ethics.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical framework for the study

This study draws on several theories to examine how AI guardrails are understood, used, and evaluated in higher education. These theories are Sociotechnical Systems Theory, Responsible AI and Ethical Governance frameworks, Institutional Theory, and Academic Integrity Theory, which underpin this study. First, Sociotechnical Systems Theory (STS) provides the principal analytical foundation for this study. STS conceptualises organisations as systems in which social elements (people, practices, values) and technical elements (tools, infrastructures, algorithms) are interdependent and must be jointly optimised for effective functioning (Baxter & Sommerville, 2011; Memarian & Doleck, 2025). This perspective is particularly relevant to AI guardrails, which involve algorithmic detection tools, institutional policies, educators' judgment, and student behaviour. Applying STS enables this study to conceptualise AI guardrails as institutional systems rather than discrete technologies. For example, AI detection tools do not operate in isolation; their effectiveness depends on how lecturers interpret reports, how students understand expectations around integrity, and how institutions regulate their use. Thus, STS supports a critical analysis of documented failures of AI guardrails, such as false positives, biased outcomes, and staff resistance, as manifestations of misalignment between technical systems and social practices rather than purely technological deficiencies (Memarian & Doleck, 2025; Williamson & Eynon, 2020).

While STS explains how AI guardrails function, Responsible AI and Ethical Governance frameworks provide the normative justification for their adoption. These frameworks emphasise principles such as fairness, transparency, accountability, explainability, privacy, and human monitoring

(Carney, 2022; Floridi et al., 2018; Floridi, 2019; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). In higher education, these principles are increasingly invoked to guide the ethical use of AI in assessment, monitoring, and decision-making. In this study, Responsible AI frameworks inform the analysis of ethical and governance guardrails, including institutional AI policies, ethical review mechanisms, and compliance structures. They also underpin the evaluation of technical guardrails, particularly AI detection and proctoring tools, by highlighting concerns about algorithmic bias, opacity, and disproportionate surveillance of marginalised students (García-Peñalvo et al., 2021; Swauger, 2020). The frameworks enable the study to examine whether AI guardrails foster ethical legitimacy and trust or merely serve as compliance-driven risk-management tools.

To explain variations in the adoption and enactment of AI guardrails across institutions, the study draws on Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutional Theory argues that organisations often adopt policies and practices to maintain legitimacy and conformity rather than to improve effectiveness. Within this lens, AI guardrails may be adopted in response to outside pressures, such as public concern about AI-enabled cheating, accreditation requirements, or sector-wide policy trends, without being meaningfully embedded in teaching and assessment practices. Institutional Theory, therefore, supports a careful review of the observed discrepancy between policy rhetoric and operational reality, explaining why AI policies and detection tools often exist without consistent staff training, evaluation mechanisms, or pedagogical alignment (Selwyn, 2023).

Given the study’s explicit attention to academic dishonesty, Academic Integrity Theory gives a crucial foundation for pedagogy. Academic integrity scholarship conceptualises integrity not simply as rule enforcement, but as a shared educational value embedded within institutional culture and evaluation design (Bretag, 2016; Macfarlane et al., 2014). Contemporary approaches advocate a shift away from punitive surveillance towards educative, preventive, and developmental strategies. Within the outlined framework, pedagogical and procedural guardrails, including authentic assessment, transparent guidelines for AI use, and AI literacy development, are provided. These are viewed as essential complements to technical

detection tools (Eaton, 2023). Academic Integrity Theory thus strengthens the study's critique of excessive reliance on AI surveillance and positions pedagogical guardrails as central to sustainable integrity practices in the AI era.

A synopsis of the mechanisms of AI guardrails

As mentioned earlier, studies describe AI guardrails as technical, ethical, and governance tools that help AI and machine learning systems operate safely, fairly, and responsibly. In higher education and society, these guardrails act as preventive and corrective measures to guide how people and AI interact, reduce harm, and protect institutional integrity (Floridi et al., 2018; Eaton, 2023). AI guardrails are becoming increasingly important due to risks such as misinformation, academic dishonesty, and bias. Institutions are beginning to implement policies, detection tools, and guidelines to manage the use of AI in teaching, learning, and assessment (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2021). Nikolinakos (2023) also suggests measures based on fairness, accountability, transparency, and ethics (FATE). However, the use of AI guardrails remains uneven, with some institutions only acting after security problems arise. Some take proactive steps, while others react, leading to inconsistent practices and policy gaps. (Dabis & Csáki, 2024) Studies show that effective AI guardrails need a holistic approach that combines technology, ethical awareness, staff training, and ongoing policy review (Chan, 2023; Evangelista, 2025; Zlotnikova et al., 2025). Investing in AI guardrails should not be just about restrictions but about creating frameworks that support innovation while protecting human values and academic integrity (Harjika, 2026; Molina-Carmona & García-Peñalvo, 2025).

AI guardrails can be better understood by unpacking their technical, ethical, and governance mechanisms, each operating at different yet interconnected levels of control and accountability. First, technical mechanisms are embedded directly within AI systems to prevent harmful or unreliable outputs. This view is supported by Atmakuri (2025, p. 11), who states that “embedded AI's democratizing potential depends on sustained commitment to inclusive design principles, diverse stakeholder engagement, and the development of technologies that serve the broader interests of global society

rather than perpetuating existing inequalities. Scholars have proposed several technical mechanisms, including algorithmic auditing, bias-detection and mitigation models, content filtering, and explainability tools, to enhance transparency and make decision-making processes interpretable (Clark et al., 2025; Dev et al., 2025). Furthermore, Sharma (2025) proposed a PPO-based RLHF framework integrating adversarial testing and automated monitoring to align outputs with human values. In the context of ML, these safeguards aim to improve robustness, fairness, and accuracy while reducing risks like hallucinations and discriminatory outputs (Floridi et al., 2018; Xui et al., 2023).

As alluded to, ethics lies at the heart of humanity; therefore, ethical mechanisms focus on normative principles that guide the responsible use of AI. Rooted in Ethics, these include fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect for human autonomy (Gianni et al., 2022; Ryan & Stahl, 2021). Studies have shown that ethical guardrails require developers and users to critically evaluate issues such as bias, consent, privacy, and the potential societal impact of AI systems (Clark et al., 2025; Dev et al., 2025; Kumar, 2026; Mulahuwaish et al., 2025). In addition, AI ethics frameworks proposed by organisations such as UNESCO (2023), OECD (2019), and UNESCO (2021) emphasise human-centred AI, ensuring that systems augment rather than undermine human dignity and agency.

In the context of this study, AI guardrails and governance are a system of specific rules, processes, and oversight to ensure that AI systems are designed, deployed, and used ethically, safely, and in line with policy imperatives and institutional values. Therefore, HEIS should ensure that governance mechanisms are implemented and operate at institutional and regulatory levels. These governance mechanisms are policies, compliance frameworks, auditing standards, and oversight bodies that regulate AI deployment. As an excellent example, Agarwal and Nene (2025) propose a five-layer framework for AI governance that could be used for integrating regulation, standards, and certification. In higher education, governance may involve academic integrity policies, guidelines for AI use, and data protection regulations that align with established frameworks (Mahrishi et al., 2025). Effective governance ensures effective decision-making and accountability

through clear roles, monitoring systems, enforcement procedures, and the enforcement of those constraints (Ademeso et al., 2025).

These mechanisms work together in layers: technical systems provide real-time protection, ethical principles guide responsible design and use, and governance structures ensure accountability and long-term success.

3. Methodology

This study used an exploratory qualitative approach, with a panel discussion as the main research method. The panel drew on panellists' knowledge and experiences, encouraging them to share evidence-based insights and engage with one another (Brannick et al., 2010; Marchant et al., 2001; Nasiri & Khojasteh, 2024). The single case study centred on a critical discussion of AI guardrails. The panellists and moderator were from the University of Ghana, the University of Mauritius, the Namibia University of Science and Technology, and the University of South Africa. Specific codes (PM1 to PM5) were used to protect the identity and confidentiality of the panellists and the moderators for the panel discussion. Five panellists from Southern African universities participated, and all consented to the online session. The 50-minute panel discussion allowed participants to share their views on issues related to student misconduct and the misuse of AI technologies. Panellists prepared in advance to answer four research questions, each speaking for up to 10 minutes. They discussed topics such as safety measures in their courses (RQ1), using AI detection to identify misuse by students and staff (RQ2), and managing AI-generated content, academic integrity courses, and tools like Turnitin and the Invigilator app to prevent cheating or plagiarism (RQ3). After the discussion, there was a 10-minute Q&A session during which the audience could ask questions directly or via the MS Teams chat. All sessions were recorded, and transcripts and chat responses were downloaded and checked for accuracy. For data analysis, NVivo 14.0 was used to identify themes through a step-by-step coding process.

- Step 1: Data Importation and Preparation – The transcripts and video recordings from MS Teams were imported into the NVivo

computerised qualitative software, titled 'Digitalisation Project'. Each case for this project was created using codes PM1-PM5.

- Step 2: Initial coding of the dataset – The transcripts were read line by line, and codes were assigned to each case using an inductive approach (direct verbatim extracts for PMs). Codes were assigned to each case: AI detection, AI provenance integration, AI surveillance, and Challenges.
- Step 3: NVivo-Assisted Pattern Recognition – After the coding process is complete, NVivo “runs” and generates frequently coded concepts or nodes, linking them to co-occurrences of codes.
- Step 4: Node Aggregation of Categories – AI-detection, Turnitin, Invigilator App, unethical behaviour, flagging non-compliance, and AI-generated content.
- Step 5: Theme Development (interpretative synthesis) -Themes were generated by synthesising categories linked to the research questions.
- Step 6: Validation and Refinement – themes were refined throughout the process through constant comparison of transcripts, revisiting disconfirming evidence, and cross-checking against theory and literature.

After the NVivo analysis was completed, the transcripts and recordings were sent to the panellists for accuracy checks. Each panellist confirmed by email that the transcripts accurately reflected the panel discussion.

4. Findings

The first RQ1 explores panellists' perceptions of AI guardrails regarding unethical behaviour, particularly academic dishonesty. This research question examines issues related to measuring information safeguarding (private data), protecting sensitive information, and the ethical use of AI guardrails to ensure academic integrity.

Safety and cybersecurity strategies for guarding, protecting and detecting unethical behaviour in the academic context

AI guardrails are conceptualised as protective mechanisms that safeguard information, uphold ethical conduct, and maintain responsible use of AI systems. They function by securing data through controlled access, ensuring that sensitive information is not exposed or misused. Guardrails also monitor user behaviour and AI-generated outputs to detect unethical practices such as manipulation, misinformation, or academic dishonesty.

Another panellist (PM3) stated that the concept is:

AI safeguards are designed to guide, protect, and restrict or monitor unethical behaviour. It is for protecting information and data, and for monitoring the unethical behaviour of users of AI technologies.

This panellist (PM1) provided a synthesis of what he understood an AI guardrail is about. He stated that it:

secures data by controlling access to sensitive information, thereby preventing exposure or misuse. It is to detect unethical practices, misinformation, or academic dishonesty.

Participants see AI guardrails as tools or measures to protect, detect, restrict, and monitor data and sensitive information, and to identify and track unethical behaviour and practices in academia.

In response to RQ2, panellists discussed their perceptions of AI guardrails as ethical, technical, and procedural safeguards to uphold academic integrity in higher education. Several themes were identified and reported with verbatim quotes from participants.

Cybersecurity measures for identifying ethical risk and flagging non-compliance in the academic context

Panellists viewed the AI policy and guidelines as drivers of academic integrity and as tools to prevent non-compliance. A major issue raised by some panellists was the detection of AI-generated content. Panellists supported AI guardrails [Turnitin AI detection or Invigilator App] that

continuously scan outputs for ethical risks and policy violations. Some also indicated that these guardrails analyse linguistic patterns, metadata, and behavioural cues to identify anomalies or synthetic text, helping institutions flag potential misuse in teaching and assessment. Ethical risk indicators, such as biased language, privacy breaches, or unsafe reasoning, trigger automatic alerts to ensure the responsible use of AI. When non-compliance is detected, the system triggers enforcement actions aligned with academic integrity and governance policies. This integrated approach enhances transparency, upholds ethical standards, and fosters the adoption of trustworthy AI in higher education. Most participants expressed support for policy guidelines related to upholding academic integrity and preventing non-compliance.

Another panellist (PM2) mentioned that she had implemented preventive measures to determine which AI technologies are allowed and which are not for her module assignments.

Students were informed that, for one of my assignments, no AI technology is allowed. I could easily identify that the AI-generated content in the assignment was manipulated and non-compliant.

Several panellists agreed that teaching students about AI detection and raising awareness are key strategies for dealing with the misuse of AI technologies. Panellist (PM3) responded to non-tolerance in his course:

In my postgraduate course, students were introduced to and trained on the use of AI technologies. During my timed examination, students must use the AI detection App to complete it. There is no place for ignorance. I believe that the more you are exposed to AI-generated content, the more quickly you will be able to identify ethical risks and safety flags in content. We are trained to increase compliance by monitoring potential risks, but we need to enforce policies to protect our qualifications.

Following PM3's comments, higher education institutions are seeing the value of combining provenance systems with required academic integrity

courses for students. The academic integrity course was well received, and students understood its importance for responsible AI use, ethical decision-making, and dealing with misuse. Academic integrity courses, AI guardrails, better provenance systems, and structured training all help build a culture of accountability, honesty, and trustworthy academic practice.

Another panellist (PM1) echoed sentiments about AI-generated content. This is what he alluded to:

AI detection is now much easier for us, enabling better source traceability of generated AI content. Which specific AI tools, like ChatGPT, Jenni.ai, or Copilot, were used? For me, the transparency and explainability of AI-generated content are potential indicators of academic dishonesty.

Furthermore, most of the panellists believed that it is in the best interests of all at the faculty to adopt ethical governance to support academic practices. Panellist (PM1) said:

I am sure that provenance and structured training in AI detection tools, along with an ethical governance management strategy to foster accountability, honesty, transparency, and trustworthy academic practices, are essential.

With reference to RQ3, panellists faced challenges in implementing AI guardrails to ensure responsible and compliant academic practices. The following issues emerged from the critical reflections.

Policy-governance misalignment and ineffective enforcement of AI guardrails in the academic context

Most often, panellists viewed the absence or weak governance of policy enforcement and ineffective institutional systems as creating uncertainty and misalignment in the implementation of AI safety measures. This is a major concern in the quest for academic integrity. Panellists noted that the absence of clear, consistent policies complicates efforts to regulate AI use and uphold academic standards. Additionally, widespread ignorance, misinformation, and limited guidance on AI safety contribute to confusion and inconsistent

practices across departments. These gaps heighten concerns about how to address unethical academic behaviours, including dishonesty and irresponsible use of AI. Consequently, ensuring responsible engagement with AI technologies and promoting compliant academic practices remain ongoing challenges, requiring stronger governance, clearer communication, and more robust institutional support mechanisms.

Several panellists (PM2 & PM3) raised concerns about the lack of awareness, inconsistent policy directives and irresponsible use of AI. A panellist highlighted:

that some of our policies are differently interpreted by lecturers. Some lecturers and students ignored policy guidelines.

Panellist (PM5) opines:

For all of us, institutional AI policies, oversight committees, inclusion in codes of conduct, and academic integrity policies are crucial measures to combat the misuse of AI technologies.

A limited understanding of how an AI guardrail functions, combined with low levels of AI literacy, makes it harder for lecturers to interpret system results, enforce ethical standards, and guide students to use AI responsibly. This knowledge gap weakens efforts to maintain academic integrity and creates uncertainty about how to apply institutional AI policies, making it challenging for lecturers. Moreover, the inconsistent detection accuracy, integration difficulties, and frequent system constraints increase complexity and reduce trust in these tools. Such challenges hinder the smooth implementation of AI guardrails as reliable mechanisms for supporting ethical compliance and academic integrity. (White, 2023) Another serious concern was whether panel members were compromising security. This panellist (PM1) stressed his views during the critical conversation:

I noticed one of our lecturers sent the username and password to the support staff in our department. How can that be allowed, and is this not a breach of ICT security or a compromise of the very essence of data protection?

Most panellists identified several challenges in implementing AI guardrails. These included weak policy enforcement, inconsistent guidance from institutions, and uncertainty about when to apply sanctions, all of which caused confusion and made it harder for lecturers to interpret guardrail results or spot unethical student behaviour. Technical complexity, system limitations, and unreliable detection accuracy also reduced people's trust in AI tools.

5. Discussion

The findings from the SRQ1 reveal that panellists conceptualise AI guardrails primarily as a cybersecurity-oriented protective mechanism designed to safeguard information, regulate user conduct, and detect unethical practices within AI-mediated environments. Across the narratives, AI guardrails are consistently framed not merely as technical controls but as integrated socio-technical systems that combine data protection, behavioural monitoring, and ethical oversight. Panellists emphasised the protective and preventative function of AI guardrails. As noted in the verbatim account by PM3, *“AI safeguards are designed to guide, protect, and restrict or monitor unethical behaviour. It is for protecting information, data, and monitoring the unethical behaviour of users of AI technologies.”* This articulation reflects a dual-layered understanding: first, guardrails act as data security mechanisms (Molina-Carmona & García-Peñalvo, 2025); second, they serve as tools for behavioural regulation (Atmakuri, 2025). This duality aligns with contemporary perspectives in cybersecurity and responsible AI, in which safeguarding systems are expected to address both technical vulnerabilities and human misuse (Makanto & Eze, 2022). Similarly, PM1 highlighted the role of AI guardrails in controlling access to sensitive information, stating that they *“secure data by controlling access to sensitive information, thereby preventing exposure or misuse... [and] detect unethical practices, misinformation, or academic dishonesty.”* This view reinforces the notion that guardrails operate through access control and surveillance mechanisms, ensuring that only authorised users can access sensitive data while also identifying deviations from ethical norms (AbdelRahman et al., 2024). The emphasis on detecting misinformation and academic dishonesty is

particularly significant in educational contexts, where AI tools can be misused to compromise academic integrity. Critically, the findings suggest that participants do not perceive AI guardrails as passive or static controls, but rather as active monitoring systems capable of identifying and responding to unethical behaviour in real time. This reflects an understanding of AI governance that extends beyond compliance to include continuous oversight and adaptive intervention (Oluoha et al., 2022). However, while this perspective highlights the strengths of AI guardrails, it also raises important concerns that excessive monitoring may lead to a culture of control, potentially undermining academic freedom (Hermanowicz, 2025). It is argued that AI guardrails are not only tools for protecting data but also mechanisms for upholding ethical standards in AI use. In academic settings, this is particularly relevant, as the misuse of AI technologies can manifest as plagiarism, fabrication, and information manipulation.

Second, SRQ2 indicate that panellists strongly position AI policies, guidelines, and detection mechanisms as central drivers in upholding academic integrity and preventing non-compliance in higher education. AI guardrails are not viewed in isolation, but as part of a broader governance ecosystem that integrates policy enforcement, detection technologies, provenance systems, and student training (Floridi et al., 2018; Sharma, 2025; Xui et al., 2023). A dominant issue raised by panellists concerns the detection of AI-generated content, which is perceived as both a growing challenge and an evolving capability. Panellists expressed support for AI guardrails such as Turnitin AI detection and the Invigilator App, which “*continuously scan outputs for ethical risks and policy violations.*” These tools were described as leveraging linguistic pattern analysis, metadata tracking, and behavioural cues to identify anomalies indicative of synthetic or manipulated text (Garib & Coffelt, 2024; Haroon-Sulyman et al., 2024). Such capabilities reflect a shift toward algorithmic surveillance and automated compliance systems, where ethical risks, such as biased language, privacy violations, or unsafe reasoning, trigger alerts and potential enforcement actions (Boutadjine et al., 2025; Ryan & Stahl, 2021).

Critically, this reliance on detection technologies signals a growing institutional emphasis on accountability and transparency, yet it also raises questions about the accuracy and reliability of AI detection tools (Atmakuri,

2025; Kaouni et al., 2025). While panellists expressed confidence in these systems, the literature cautions that AI detection is not always definitive and may yield false positives or fail to detect sophisticated AI-assisted writing. Panellists further emphasised the role of explicit policy enforcement and preventative measures. For example, PM2 described implementing clear restrictions: “for one of my assignments, no AI technology is allowed.” This illustrates a compliance-driven approach, with boundaries clearly defined to minimise ambiguity in AI use (Gianni et al., 2022; Mahrishi et al., 2025). However, the ability to “easily identify... manipulated and non-compliant” content also suggests reliance on educator expertise alongside technological tools.

This reinforces the importance of pedagogical awareness and professional judgement in identifying misuse. In addition, PM3 emphasised a zero-tolerance stance, supported by training and controlled assessment environments, stating that students were required to use the Invigilator App during timed examinations. His assertion that “there is no place for ignorance” reflects a strong belief in exposure and training as mechanisms for compliance. The idea that increased familiarity with AI-generated content enhances the ability to detect ethical risks highlights the importance of AI literacy among both students and lecturers (Chan, 2023; Langlois et al., 2023). However, such strict enforcement approaches may risk creating a compliance culture driven by surveillance, rather than fostering intrinsic ethical responsibility (Chan, 2023; Evangelista, 2025).

A significant contribution of this theme is its emphasis on AI provenance as a complementary mechanism to detection. Provenance systems, which track the origin, lineage, and authenticity of AI-generated content, were seen as strengthening transparency and aligning outputs with ethical standards (Boutadjine et al., 2025; Clark et al., 2025). As PM1 noted, “AI detection is now much easier for us for source traceability... Which specific AI tools... were used?” This reflects a growing expectation that AI systems should provide traceable and explainable outputs, enabling lecturers to verify authenticity and identify potential misconduct. Importantly, panellists linked these technological measures to educational interventions, particularly academic integrity courses (Bretag, 2018; Memarian & Doleck, 2023). These courses were well received by students and helped them understand ethical

decision-making, the responsible use of AI, and the consequences of misuse (Zlotnikova et al., 2025). This suggests that effective governance requires not only enforcement mechanisms but also capacity-building initiatives that cultivate a culture of integrity (Bretag, 2018; Mabhoko, 2025). Measures such as structured training, provenance systems, and AI guardrails collectively promote accountability, honesty, and transparency (Harjika, 2026; Mishra, 2025).

Finally, panellists emphasised the importance of ethical governance frameworks at the faculty level. As articulated by PM1, the integration of provenance, training, and detection tools forms *“an ethical governance management strategy to foster accountability, honesty, transparency and trustworthy academic practices.”* This highlights a shift from fragmented interventions toward a holistic governance approach that aligns policy, technology, and pedagogy to support responsible AI use.

The findings from SRQ3 reveal that ineffective institutional systems significantly undermine the implementation of AI safety measures, creating uncertainty, inconsistency, and misalignment in efforts to uphold academic integrity. Panellists consistently identified the absence of clear, coherent, and consistently applied policies as a central challenge. Without unified institutional direction, lecturers and students interpret policies differently, leading to fragmented practices and weakened enforcement (Gupta et al., 2025; Hermanowicz, 2025). As one panellist noted, *“some of our policies are differently interpreted by lecturers. Some lecturers and students ignored policy guidelines.”* This highlights a critical gap between policy formulation and policy enactment, where ambiguity fosters non-compliance rather than accountability.

A major concern emerging from the data is the lack of awareness and widespread misinformation regarding AI safety and ethical use. Panellists (PM2 & PM3) pointed to limited guidance and inconsistent communication as factors contributing to cross-departmental confusion. This environment of uncertainty complicates efforts to regulate AI use effectively and to address unethical academic behaviours, such as dishonesty and the misuse of AI tools (Davis, 2025; Eaton, 2023). The findings suggest that in the absence of clear institutional messaging, individuals rely on personal interpretations that may not align with broader academic integrity frameworks. Panellists also

emphasised the importance of institutional governance structures, such as oversight committees and the integration of AI policies into codes of conduct. As PM5 opined, *“institutional AI policies, oversight committees, inclusion in codes of conduct, and academic integrity policies are crucial measures to combat the misuse of AI technologies.”* This reflects an understanding that formal governance mechanisms are necessary to standardise practices, ensure accountability, and provide a foundation for consistent enforcement (Carney, 2022; Floridi et al., 2018; Floridi, 2019; Nikolinakos, 2023). However, the mere existence of such structures is insufficient without effective implementation, monitoring, and communication. Another critical issue identified is the limited AI literacy among lecturers, particularly regarding how AI guardrails function (Emiri et al., 2024; Ngoveni, 2025).

Therefore, a lack of understanding of AI guardrail systems and their outputs constrains lecturers' ability to interpret results, uphold ethical standards, and guide students responsibly. This knowledge gap weakens the effectiveness of AI interventions and contributes to uncertainty in the application of institutional policies. Importantly, this finding underscores that technological solutions cannot compensate for insufficient human capacity; rather, they require informed users who can critically engage with AI outputs. The technical complexity and limitations of AI guardrails further exacerbate these challenges (Agarwal & Nene, 2025; Mishra, 2025). Panellists reported issues such as inconsistent detection accuracy, integration difficulties with existing systems, and frequent technical constraints. These limitations undermine trust in AI tools and hinder their adoption as reliable mechanisms for ensuring ethical compliance. The perception that detection systems may be unreliable or difficult to use creates reluctance among lecturers, ultimately weakening the intended impact of these technologies on academic integrity.

A particularly concerning issue raised relates to basic cybersecurity practices and potential security breaches. PM1 highlighted a case in which login credentials were shared with support staff, asking: *“How can that be allowed, and is this not a breach of ICT security?”* This example illustrates that, beyond sophisticated AI guardrails, fundamental security practices remain vulnerable, potentially undermining the integrity of the entire system (Gupta et al., 2025; Hermanowicz, 2025). It also reflects a broader issue of institutional culture and awareness, where lapses in basic digital ethics can

compromise more advanced security measures (Gupta et al., 2025; Mishra, 2025). Furthermore, panellists pointed to weak policy enforcement and uncertainty around sanctions as significant barriers. The lack of clarity regarding when and how to apply consequences for non-compliance creates hesitation and inconsistency among lecturers. This not only undermines the credibility of institutional policies but also signals to students that enforcement may be negotiable or uneven. Such inconsistencies weaken the overall goal of fostering a culture of integrity and responsible AI use.

Implications

To use AI guardrails effectively in higher education, strong policies must be complemented by practical steps. Policies should be clear, consistent, and flexible, and should include ethical principles such as transparency, fairness, accountability, and respect for user autonomy. They should also match academic integrity and data protection standards, balancing oversight with privacy. Regular policy reviews and stakeholder involvement are important for keeping policies relevant and building trust in the institution.

In practice, effective use of AI guardrails depends on strong institutional support. Universities should focus on improving AI literacy for students, staff, and faculty, and offer professional development to encourage responsible AI use in teaching and assessment. Investing in secure technologies, like provenance and detection systems, is also important. Creating a culture of ethical responsibility through open communication and shared accountability is more effective than relying solely on punishment.

6. Conclusion

Although panellists held differing views on AI guardrails, they agreed that these tools are essential for protecting systems, securing information, monitoring unethical behaviour, and ensuring institutions adhere to their own policies. AI guardrails are seen as integrated systems that safeguard sensitive data, guide user behaviour, and detect unethical actions, combining cybersecurity with ethical governance. The findings underscore the need for better governance, clearer communication, thorough training, and strong institutional support to reduce cyber risks. If these areas are not addressed, AI

guardrails may perform less effectively or consistently, potentially undermining ethical compliance and academic integrity (Alsharefeen & Sayari, 2025). Drawing on the study and existing research, a systematic literature review will be conducted to develop a comprehensive AI ethics framework for higher education that strengthens ethical governance and responsible AI use. The study also highlights the value of combining qualitative and quantitative research to better understand and evaluate AI guardrails, with long-term, participatory approaches helping to develop effective governance frameworks.

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8. Short biography

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Ethical Dilemmas of Generative AI in Higher Education

Implications for Academic Integrity

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Keywords

Academic integrity, ethical dilemmas, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, connectivism, digital infrastructure, technology acceptance model.

Abstract

The development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified debates regarding academic integrity in digitally mediated higher education. This study explored AI-related ethical dilemmas affecting academic integrity at a South African research-intensive university. It examined how graduate students interpret and navigate ethical tensions in AI use, and how institutional and structural conditions shape these experiences. A qualitative single-case design was used. Sixteen graduate students from a School of Public Health participated through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The study was theoretically informed by an integrative framework combining the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and connectivism, extended through an academic integrity lens. Two interrelated themes emerged. First, students articulated an ethical adoption tension: while recognising AI's usefulness and efficiency, they expressed concerns about overreliance, blurred authorship, data privacy, and the erosion of critical thinking and scholarly identity. Second, participants highlighted structural and institutional conditions shaping AI engagement, including unequal access to digital resources, uncertainty about institutional expectations, and the need for ethical AI literacy. The study offers a contextually grounded perspective from a Global South setting and reframes academic integrity in the AI era as a systemic governance issue requiring clear AI-integrated academic integrity policies, responsible implementation mechanisms, assessment redesign, and shared institutional accountability.

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1. Introduction

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, particularly since the release of Open AI's ChatGPT in November 2022, has profoundly disrupted higher education globally. Generative AI tools are now capable of producing essays, summarising research, generating code, synthesising data, and stimulating academic discourse at a level that challenges traditional understandings of authorship and knowledge production (Chan & Colloton, 2024). While these advancements offer undeniable pedagogical benefits, including personalised learning support, language assistance, increased efficiency, and improved access to information, they simultaneously introduce complex ethical dilemmas that directly affect academic integrity. These dilemmas are particularly significant in blended learning approaches, which is the context of this study. Blended learning here refers to an institutional approach that combines face-to-face teaching with digitally mediated learning activities, including online platforms, virtual discussions, and remote assessment. In this context, teaching, learning, and assessment are often mediated through digital platforms, and students heavily depend on remote access to online sources (Singh & Mohamad, 2025). In such contexts, generative AI tools function both as academic support mechanisms and as potential sources of ethical ambiguity, especially where lecturer oversight is less immediate and assessment authenticity is more difficult to verify.

Higher education institutions have historically grounded their missions in principles of honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility and respect. However, the growing integration of AI into academic work has blurred the boundaries between legitimate academic support and academic misconduct. The ability of AI to generate coherent, original-appearing texts raises questions about authorship and academic integrity. For example, who is the true author of AI-generated texts, and at what point does assistance transition into mere substitution? How should institutions distinguish between ethical augmentation and academic dishonesty? These unsolved questions have created uncertainty among students, lecturers, and institutional leaders alike.

Globally, higher education institutions are facing what may be described as an academic integrity crisis in the digital era (Nykyropets, 2023; Nelson, 2024). Traditional plagiarism detection systems were designed to identify copied human text, not synthetically generated content. At the same time, many institutions lack comprehensive policies, staff training, and assessment redesign strategies to respond to AI-enabled misconduct (Muringa, 2025). The result is a widening gap between technological advancement and institutional preparedness. Academic integrity is therefore no longer merely an issue of individual student behaviour; it has become a structural challenge embedded within institutional policy, digital infrastructure, assessment practices, and ethical governance frameworks. In this regard, academic integrity in the context of generative AI should be understood as part of broader institutional AI governance. In this regard, academic integrity in the context of generative AI should be understood as part of broader institutional AI governance, including policy clarity, transparency expectations, accountability, risk monitoring, and support for responsible AI implementation. International frameworks such as UNESCO’s guidance on AI in education and the OECD AI Principles emphasise that AI adoption should be human-centred, transparent, equitable, accountable, and aligned with educational values (Cukurova & Miao, 2024; Bo, 2025).

In the South African context, this challenge is particularly alarming. While universities increasingly promote innovation and digital transformation, policy development on generative AI remains uneven and, in many cases, reactive rather than proactive (Mulenga & Shilango, 2024). Students operate in an environment where AI tools are freely available, yet limited institutional guidance on ethical use may weaken the credibility of academic work and qualifications awarded by higher education institutions. The core problem underpinning this study is therefore the growing tension between the rapid adoption of generative AI technologies, especially within digitally mediated blended learning environments, and the absence of sufficiently clear ethical frameworks, institutional policies, and educational strategies to safeguard academic integrity.

This study is situated at a South African research-intensive university that offers both blended and face-to-face learning. The institution also

incorporates distance and digitally mediated learning, making it an appropriate context for examining AI-related ethical dilemmas within blended learning environments. As an institution committed to innovation, it is actively engaging with generative AI. However, the lived experiences and ethical perceptions of students within this evolving environment remain underexplored.

Guided by the research gap, the research question guiding the study is:

What are the AI ethical dilemmas undermining academic integrity in higher education institutions?

By exploring graduate students' perspectives, this study aims to contribute to the development of contextually grounded, ethically informed, and practically applicable institutional responses to generative AI in higher education.

2. Literature review

The rapid integration of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT into higher education has prompted intense scholarly debate regarding their ethical implications and impact on academic integrity (Okaiyeto et al., 2023; Hutson, 2024). Emerging research highlights both pedagogical opportunities and profound structural challenges, particularly in contexts where institutional policies and digital infrastructures remain underdeveloped. Three dominant strands of literature are especially relevant to this study: 1) ethical dilemmas related to academic integrity, 2) institutional AI governance and responsible implementation and 3) issues of access, digital equity, and institutional support

AI, ethical dilemmas, and academic integrity

A growing body of international scholarship identifies generative AI as a disruptive force in academic writing, assessment, and knowledge production (Chan & Colloton, 2024). Unlike earlier digital tools, AI systems can generate text that appears original, making traditional plagiarism-detection

mechanisms increasingly inadequate. This shift complicates long-standing definitions of authorship, originality, and intellectual contribution.

Mulenga and Shilonga (2024) argue that academic integrity frameworks in many African institutions were designed for conventional plagiarism rather than AI-assisted authorship, resulting in regulatory ambiguity. Similarly, Agrawal (2024) contends that ethical considerations are crucial, including transparent disclosure of AI use, proper attribution, and procedures to prevent misuse. Without such considerations, students operate in ethical grey zones where the boundary between legitimate support and misconduct becomes blurred. However, concerns extend beyond plagiarism. Vasylyshyna et al. (2024) and Huang (2023) highlight risks related to data privacy, algorithm bias, and informed consent. These concerns are particularly relevant in disciplines such as public health, where sensitive data and ethical accountability are paramount. Moreover, Khan (2023) warns that AI systems may unintentionally reinforce structural inequalities if biases embedded in training data are not critically interrogated.

In the South African context, Muringa (2025) notes that many universities lack clear academic integrity regulations pertaining to AI, resulting in moral dilemmas and uncertainty among students and lecturers. This policy gap reinforces students’ perceptions that AI use is simultaneously unavoidable and insufficiently regulated.

Institutional AI governance and responsible implementation

In the context of academic integrity, governance extends beyond misconduct prevention to include proactive policy development, assessment redesign, disclosure requirements, staff and student training, data protection, and procedures for responding to AI-related risks. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework also offers a useful way of thinking about responsible AI implementation through four interrelated functions: governing, mapping, measuring, and managing AI-related risks (NIST, 2023). Although developed beyond higher education, this framework is relevant because it shifts attention from individual misuse to institutional processes for identifying risks,

assigning responsibility, monitoring implementation, and improving practice over time. Applied to higher education, this shifts the focus from individual ethical judgement alone to institutional systems that guide, monitor, and support responsible AI use. It requires institution-wide accountability structures, including clear ownership of AI policy, academic integrity committees or working groups, lecturer development, student guidance, data governance protocols, and regular review of assessment practices. In this sense, academic integrity in the AI era is both an ethical and governance challenge. Thus, the literature reveals a significant unresolved tension: while AI enhances efficiency, accessibility, and academic productivity (Giglio & Costa, 2023), it simultaneously destabilises established ethical norms. To address this dilemma, this study draws on empirical insights into how students themselves interpret and navigate these ethical dilemmas within the South African higher education context.

Provision of resources, institutional support, and the digital divide

Parallel to ethical concerns, another major strand of scholarship foregrounds the institutional responsibility to ensure the equitable provision of resources and structured support for AI integration. The debate extends beyond mere access to generative AI tools and instead interrogates how universities can systematically address the AI-driven digital divide. While generative AI platforms are often portrayed as universally accessible, access is mediated by material resources such as reliable internet connectivity, appropriate devices, licensed software, and campus infrastructure. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasises that digital equity depends not only on the availability of technology tools but also on institutional investment in connectivity, hardware provision, digital literacy development, and structured academic support (Gottschalk & Wiese, 2023).

In developing contexts, socio-economic disparities significantly shape students' engagement with AI technologies. Chari (2024) argues that without deliberate institutional interventions such as subsidised access, device loan programmes, and data provision, digital transformation initiatives risk deepening rather than narrowing inequalities. The promise of AI as an inclusive educational tool, therefore, depends on systematic infrastructure and

policy support. Beyond physical access, scholars emphasise the importance of digital literacy and ethical AI competence. Qiao et al. (2023) demonstrate that access without structured training leads to misuse or superficial engagement. Students require guided exposure, curriculum integration, and explicit instruction on responsible AI use. Similarly, Fudge et al. (2022) argue for educative approaches to academic integrity that embed ethical practice within teaching rather than punitive enforcement.

In South Africa, where digital divides persist across socio-economic and geographic lines, the integration of AI technologies intersects directly with broader equity challenges. While some students may perceive AI as universally accessible via smartphones or university facilities, others experience connectivity challenges and limited device access. In blended learning contexts, where many students study remotely and lack regular access to on-campus laboratories, libraries, or institutional infrastructure, these disparities become even more pronounced and structurally embedded (Mudau et al., 2022; Woldegiorgis, 2022). This uneven access shapes not only usage patterns but also perceptions of fairness, opportunity, and institutional responsibility.

3. Theoretical framework

The study is grounded in an integrated framework combining the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and connectivism, extended through an academic integrity lens. While TAM explains why students adopt AI technologies and connectivism explains how learning occurs within digitally mediated networks, their integration allows for a deeper understanding of how AI use intersects with ethical decision-making and institutional responsibility.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) posits that technology adoption is primarily influenced by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In the context of generative AI, students are likely to adopt tools such as ChatGPT when they perceive them as enhancing academic performance, improving efficiency, or simplifying tasks (Sevnarayan & Potter, 2024). However, while this model provides insights into the positive aspects of AI adoption, it also unveils ethical tensions.

The same attributes that render AI tools appealing, such as speed, accessibility, and efficiency, may inadvertently facilitate misconduct by increasing the temptation to engage in dishonest practices (Asad & Ajaz, 2024). Specifically in blended learning environments where assessment occurs remotely, the apparent usefulness of AI can become a double-edged sword, complicating integrity issues.

Connectivism (Siemens, 2005) conceptualises learning as the formation and navigation of networks that include people, digital platforms, and information systems. In blended learning contexts, generative AI tools function as nodes within students' learning networks, providing rapid access to synthesised knowledge and academic support (Tikhonova & Raitskaya, 2023). Connectivism emphasises autonomy and critical evaluation; therefore, ethical engagement with AI requires digital literacy. Without structured guidance, AI may shift from being a supportive learning node to a cognitive substitute, potentially undermining critical thinking. Connectivism also foregrounds access to networks. In blended learning systems characterised by uneven connectivity and device availability, participation in AI-enhanced learning networks is not equally distributed. Ethical AI integration must therefore be understood alongside issues of digital equity and institutional support (Khan, 2023; Sevnarayan & Potter, 2024).

The framework also requires an institutional governance layer. TAM explains why students may adopt AI tools, and connectivism explains how AI becomes embedded in learning networks, but neither framework fully accounts for institutional accountability, policy direction, or risk management. For this reason, the study also interprets students' experiences through an academic integrity governance lens, focusing on how institutions can create enabling conditions for responsible AI use through policies, training, disclosure mechanisms, assessment redesign, and accountability structures.

Taken together, this integrated framework enables the study to examine how technological affordances, learning networks, ethical decision-making, and institutional conditions interact to either safeguard or undermine academic integrity in the era of generative AI.

4. Methodology

Research context

The study was conducted at a South African research-intensive university offering blended, face-to-face, and online learning strategies. The institution has progressively expanded its use of digital platforms and AI-supported tools to enhance academic engagement and research productivity. This context reflects broader global shifts toward digitalisation in higher education while simultaneously embodying the realities of AI adoption within a Global South setting (Maimela & Mbonde, 2025). In such settings, persistent socio-economic disparities, uneven digital access, and evolving institutional policies create a particularly relevant environment for examining both ethical challenges and issues of equity in AI integration.

Given the fact that significant components of teaching and assessment are digitally mediated, the site offered a valuable opportunity to explore how AI use intersects with academic integrity in technologically facilitated learning environments. Such contexts entail a complex interplay of institutional expectations and ethical challenges that justify further exploration (Alshahrani et al., 2024)

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative single-case study design to investigate graduate students’ perceptions of AI-related ethical dilemmas in higher education. A case study is particularly suitable when examining contemporary phenomena embedded within complex institutional contexts (Yin, 2013; Tjandra & Feri, 2023). The selected university constituted a bounded case. Rather than isolating variables, this design allowed for exploration of lived experiences, interpretations, and contextual influences shaping AI.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited from the School of Public Health at the study site. The School offers undergraduate and graduate programmes across diverse disciplines, including community medicine, epidemiology, health policy and advocacy, health economics, occupational health, rural health and social and behavioural change communication. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of graduate students with experience using AI tools in academic contexts, enabling them to provide informed reflections on ethical considerations and practical use. Convenience sampling facilitated recruitment within the institutional setting.

An invitation outlining the study's purpose and participation requirements was emailed to 20 graduate students. Sixteen students consented and participated in the study. Students from a variety of academic backgrounds and academic stages participated in public health-related programs at a South African university. Students from both coursework and research-based programs, across different ages, comprised the sample, enabling the study to capture a range of viewpoints within the field of public health. Graduate students were intentionally selected for their advanced engagement with academic writing, literature synthesis, data interpretation, and research activities. Their academic maturity provided deeper insight into both the perceived benefits and ethical complexities of AI adoption.

Data Generation

Data were generated using two complementary research instruments: open-ended online questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, administered via Google Forms, invited participants to provide written reflections on AI use, academic integrity, ethical concerns, digital access, and institutional support. This instrument allowed participants sufficient time to reflect on sensitive issues such as academic integrity. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams to deepen and clarify questionnaire responses. The interview guide was informed by key TAM constructs, particularly perceived usefulness and

perceived ease of use, while also probing issues of integrity, authorship, digital access, and institutional responsibility. These two instruments enhanced methodological depth and allowed for triangulation of insights across data sources.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data generation, institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities. Participants received detailed information regarding the study’s objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature. Informed consent was secured electronically before participation started.

Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research without consequences. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms (P1-P16) were assigned during analysis and reporting.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets. The analysis followed a systematic process. First, we engaged in repeated reading of questionnaire responses and interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to capture significant ideas related to ethical concerns, AI usage patterns, and institutional support. Third, the preliminary themes were carefully reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and a clear distinction among them. Fourth, these were defined and named to capture their central meanings in relation to the research question and theoretical framework. Lastly, the themes were integrated into a coherent narrative linking participants’ perspectives to the broader literature and conceptual framework.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigour, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across questionnaires and interviews, as well as sustained engagement with the dataset. A rich description of the institutional context enhances transferability by allowing readers to assess its applicability to similar contexts. An audit trail documenting the data analysis process supports dependability and confirmability. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the analysis process to minimise researcher bias.

5. Findings & Discussion

The analysis generated two interrelated themes: how graduate students perceive the ethical dilemmas associated with AI and the institutional conditions that shape its ethical use. Participants in the first theme responded to questions about the ethical concerns of using AI. The findings reveal that AI adoption is experienced not simply as technological uptake, but as a morally negotiated and structurally mediated process.

Ethical tensions and academic integrity in AI use

Several participants expressed concerns about data privacy and algorithm bias. Participant 1 stated that her biggest concern about the ethical usage of AI was “privacy and protection of user data”, while Participant 12 elaborated on this concern, highlighting the importance of data privacy, informed consent, and the potential for algorithmic bias, stating, “I believe the ethical implications of using AI are significant and must be carefully considered, particularly in fields like public health and education.” These concerns align with Huang (2023) and Vasylyshyna et al. (2024), who emphasise that AI integration introduces complex governance challenges, especially regarding ownership and informed consent. Within a connectivist framework (Siemens, 2005), AI functions as a node within learning networks; however, when knowledge is mediated through opaque algorithms, responsibility becomes distributed and less visible. Participants’ concerns demonstrate awareness that AI is not merely a neutral tool but an ethically embedded system. Participant 12 further remarked that “AI systems can unintentionally reinforce inequalities if not properly designed or monitored.” This

observation resonates with Khan’s (2023) argument that AI may reproduce structural bias if not critically interrogated. This reiterates the fact that ethical concerns extend beyond plagiarism to broader systemic implications.

Participants consistently acknowledged AI’s usefulness while simultaneously expressing concern about its misuse. Participant 3 stated, “AI is intended to augment your materials, not perform the thinking for you.” Similarly, Participant 6 added:

“ I believe that employing AI comes with a lot of responsibility. It’s tempting to rely on it too heavily; therefore, I aim to keep my work original. I believe it is critical to employ AI as a support rather than a shortcut that detracts from personal work or originality.

These comments reflect high perceived usefulness, which is a key TAM construct (Davis, 1989; Sevnarayan & Potter, 2024). However, they also reflect ethical tension. The very attributes that make AI attractive, such as speed, convenience, and efficiency, may increase the temptation to bypass cognitive effort. Participant 7 further highlighted that AI is “challenging, because copy and paste is easier”, suggesting that ease of use may lower ethical barriers. Participant 16 warned that, “depending on the use, it can plagiarise work done by others if used as is.”

This duality illustrates what may be termed an ethical adoption paradox: students recognise AI’s academic value yet fear its potential to undermine integrity. This extends TAM beyond adoption intention by demonstrating that perceived usefulness does not eliminate ambivalence. This ambivalence is further amplified in online learning contexts, where assessment is digitally mediated, and lecturer oversight is less immediate (Singh & Mohamad, 2025).

Participants voiced concern about diminishing reasoning capacity. Participant 8 cautioned that “reasoning capacity will be limited and solely rely on AI for the information that one would easily obtain”, while Participant 9 stated that “it cannot be used to replace human effort.” These comments resonate with Nelson’s (2024) analysis of academic identity in the AI era, in which he

argues that generative AI disrupts traditional understandings of authorship, intellectual ownership, and scholarly voice. When students rely heavily on AI-generated content, the boundaries between individual intellectual labour and machine-assisted production blur. In this study, participants' concerns about AI "replacing human effort" and limiting "reasoning capacity" suggest an awareness that overreliance on AI may weaken not only critical thinking but also the development of scholarly identity. From a connectivist perspective (Siemens, 2005), AI becomes a node within the student's network; however, if that node begins to dominate cognitive processes rather than support them, the student's intellectual identity may be diminished. This, tension reflects more than anxiety about plagiarism; it reflects deeper concerns about what it means to think, write, and learn authentically in an AI-mediated environment. Interestingly, participants did not outright reject AI. Rather, they held balanced views and advocated integration within ethical norms, which echo the views of Asad and Ajaz (2024) that AI should function as scaffolding, not substitution.

Participants consistently called for clearer institutional policies. Participant 14 stated unequivocally,

“ As AI evolves, there should be stronger policies and educational efforts to ensure its ethical use and security measures, particularly in sensitive areas like education.

Participant 2 emphasised that "...AI access will be revoked if you are found using it for the wrong things", later clarifying that "wrong things" referred to practices such as plagiarism and academic fraud.

These remarks reflect uncertainty regarding institutional expectations. Muringa (2025) notes that South African universities often lack explicit AI-integrated integrity frameworks. Participants' calls for structured guidance confirm that ethical dilemmas are not solely individual failings but institutional governance issues, in line with Nykyporets (2023), who argues that academic integrity in the AI era is structural rather than behavioural.

These findings suggest that institutional responses should move beyond general warnings against plagiarism. Participants’ uncertainty points to the need for clearer AI governance mechanisms that clarify acceptable AI use, disclosure expectations, and shared responsibilities across students, lecturers, departments, and institutional leadership.

Provision of Resources, Institutional Support, and the AI Digital Divide

While Theme 1 focussed on ethical tensions, Theme 2 revealed how structural access conditions shape AI engagement in blended learning contexts. The responses were based on questions on how institutions can make AI technologies more accessible to students.

Participants strongly emphasised financial and structural barriers. Participant 1 proposed “installing the applications for free for them”, while Participant 5 said,

“ AI is only accessible through the use of technologies, so the university should have a laptop use program that may be incorporated into the fees.

“Data provision to students of low-income households” was mentioned by Participant 10, highlighting the need to include affordable internet access. Several participants argued for better on-campus amenities, acknowledging that not all students have access to computers or dependable home internet. For example, both Participants 6 and 15 advised that universities “install AI in libraries” and “set up computer labs where students can freely use AI tools”, respectively, highlighting the importance of physical places on campus in ensuring equitable access. These responses reflect awareness that access extends beyond tool availability to structured environments for equitable engagement. Participants further felt that institutions should provide free or subsidised access to software and equipment. Suggestions were made that AI tools be included in loan programmes, to further support the idea of hardware accessibility. For example, Participant 12 reiterated this, emphasising that “loan programs for laptops and data packages” were one

way that institutions could provide assistance. This aligns with OECD guidance (Gottschalk & Wiese, 2023), emphasising institutional responsibility for digital access.

These views align with Chari (2024), who warns that digital transformation without equity mechanisms risks deepening inequalities. In blended learning models, where students depend on personal devices and connectivity (Mudau et al., 2022; Woldegiorgis, 2022), unequal access directly affects participation in AI-enhanced learning networks. Also, from a connectivist standpoint, students excluded from digital networks cannot fully participate in knowledge construction.

However, in contrast to the above views, Participant 3 stated:

“ Fortunately, most students have smartphones, and there are libraries ... so I don't think access is still a challenge.

This divergence reveals differing perceptions of digital readiness, highlighting how perceived access may differ from structural realities documented in digital divide research (Woldegiorgis et al., 2022).

Participants consistently emphasised that access to AI tools alone is insufficient without structured training and ethical guidance. Participant 2 proposed “a workshop that is going to be teaching students about the new technologies”, while Participant 16 recommended “courses on the safe use of AI and different freely available platforms.” These responses suggest that students do not view AI misuse as inevitable, but rather as preventable through education and structured support. The finding aligns with Qiao et al., (2023), who argue that technological access without guided digital literacy often results in superficial or inappropriate engagement. From a TAM perspective, perceived ease of use may accelerate AI adoption; however, ease without ethical literacy may lower resistance to misuse. Participants' call for workshops and formal integration suggests recognition that perceived usefulness must be accompanied by clarity. In other words, adoption calls for ethical framing. Participants' emphasis on training further reflects awareness that digital competence involves not only technical proficiency, but also the

ability to interrogate AI outputs, recognise bias, and maintain intellectual ownership. This aligns with the arguments of Khan (2023), arguing that ethical AI integration depends on cultivating critical awareness rather than assuming technological neutrality.

6. Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest that academic integrity in the era of generative AI must be reconceptualised as a structural and pedagogical challenge rather than solely a matter of individual misconduct. Participants demonstrated ethical awareness, but they also expressed uncertainty regarding institutional expectations, acceptable AI use, authorship, and the boundaries between support and substitution. This indicates that academic integrity risks are intensified when policies, assessment practices, and institutional guidance do not keep pace with students’ actual use of AI. In blended learning contexts, where teaching, learning, and assessment are digitally mediated and lecturer oversight may be less immediate, these tensions become even more pronounced. Institutions should therefore move beyond reactive or punitive responses and develop proactive approaches that support responsible AI use while safeguarding intellectual authenticity.

Assessment redesign is central to this shift. The findings suggest that AI-related integrity concerns cannot be addressed only through detection tools or warnings against plagiarism. Institutions need to consider how assessment tasks can value process, reflection, contextual application, oral defence, iterative drafting, and authentic problem-solving, rather than relying primarily on final written products that may be easily generated or heavily supported by AI. At the same time, assessment redesign must remain fair, scalable, inclusive, and sensitive to unequal access to digital resources. AI-resilient assessment should therefore not only aim to prevent misconduct, but also promote deeper learning, transparency, student accountability, and the development of independent scholarly judgement.

The findings also point to the need for AI-integrated academic integrity frameworks and responsible implementation mechanisms. Such frameworks should clarify the difference between acceptable AI-assisted learning,

inappropriate AI substitution, and academic misconduct. They should also establish disclosure expectations, including when and how students should acknowledge AI use in idea generation, editing, translation, data analysis, or text production. In addition, institutions should develop accountability structures, such as institutional AI committees, teaching and learning units, ethics offices, and academic integrity bodies, to coordinate policy development and implementation. Responsible AI implementation should include lecturer development, student training, data privacy guidance, assessment support, and regular review of AI-related policies as technologies and student practices continue to evolve. These implications align with broader responsible AI principles that emphasise transparency, human-centred values, safety, accountability, and continuous risk management.

The study further highlights that ethical AI engagement is inseparable from digital literacy and digital equity. Participants' comments on access to devices, data, software, laboratories, and institutional support show that responsible AI use cannot be separated from the broader material conditions under which students learn. Technological adoption must therefore be accompanied by ethical competence, critical evaluation skills, and equitable access. Without structured support, AI may deepen existing inequalities by benefiting students who already have stronger digital access, higher levels of confidence, and better institutional resources. Universities should therefore approach AI literacy not only as technical training, but as a broader educational responsibility that includes ethical judgement, critical interrogation of AI outputs, awareness of bias, and understanding of authorship and academic integrity.

The integrated theoretical framework provides a useful basis for interpreting these implications. TAM explains why students are likely to adopt generative AI when they perceive it as useful, efficient, and easy to use. However, the findings show that these same adoption drivers may create academic integrity risks when institutional expectations are unclear. Connectivism further explains how AI becomes embedded as a node within students' digital learning networks. Yet, when access, guidance, and critical literacy are uneven, AI may either support learning or contribute to overreliance, reduced intellectual effort, and inequitable participation. The findings therefore

suggest that theoretical understandings of AI adoption and networked learning must be extended through institutional governance mechanisms that regulate, guide, and support responsible AI use.

In this regard, institutional AI readiness requires more than access to digital tools. It includes policy readiness, staff capacity, student AI literacy, data governance, assessment preparedness, infrastructure, and the ability of institutional leaders to coordinate responsible implementation across academic and support units. Without such readiness, AI integration may remain fragmented, uneven, and dependent on individual lecturers or students rather than supported through coherent institutional strategy. The broader implication is that higher education institutions should develop future-oriented AI governance models that are developmental, participatory, and iterative. Such models should support ongoing policy review, human oversight, responsible innovation, and shared accountability among students, lecturers, academic departments, professional support units, and institutional leadership.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to explore AI-related ethical dilemmas perceived as undermining academic integrity in higher education institutions, within a specific context. By examining graduate students’ perspectives, it sought to understand how generative AI is experienced not merely as a technological innovation, but as an ethically complex and institutionally mediated phenomenon.

From the findings, two interrelated themes emerged. First, students articulated a persistent tension between recognising AI’s academic usefulness and fearing its potential to compromise originality, critical thinking, and scholarly identity. Concerns extended beyond plagiarism to include data privacy, algorithm bias, and authorship ambiguity, reflecting a sophisticated awareness of AI as an ethically embedded system. Second, participants highlighted structural conditions shaping AI engagement, including uneven digital access, the need for institutional support, and the importance of ethical

and digital literacy. Together, these findings demonstrate that AI-related integrity challenges are both morally negotiated and materially conditioned.

The study contributes to the evolving scholarship on AI in higher education by providing empirically grounded insights from a Global South perspective and by integrating the TAM and connectivism within the academic integrity framework. By conceptualising AI adoption as technologically enabled, ethically negotiated, and structurally mediated, the study advances a multidimensional understanding of integrity in the era of generative AI.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional case. It focussed on graduate students from one academic school, which might limit the transferability of the findings to other disciplines and institutions. The relatively small sample also constrains the breadth of perspective represented. Future research could extend this work by including multiple institutional and comparative disciplinary analyses, as well as the perspectives of lecturers and institutional leaders. Additionally, quantitative and mixed-methods research could explore the relationships between perceived usefulness, ethical awareness, and actual AI usage patterns at scale.

As generative AI continues to transform higher education, the central challenge is not whether institutions will integrate AI, but whether they can do so in ways that sustain intellectual authenticity, promote equity, and preserve public trust. The study therefore points to the need for future-oriented AI governance models that combine policy clarity, human oversight, participatory institutional decision-making, AI literacy development, and continuous review of emerging AI risks. Such models are essential for learning ecosystems in which technological innovation and ethical responsibility evolve together.

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Peace Education and the Empathy Dimension of Tolerance in Indonesian Higher Education

A Cross-Institutional Predictive Study

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Abstract

Peace education serves as a critical intervention against the rising tide of religious intolerance and polarization in Indonesia, forces that directly threaten societal well-being and peace, particularly within the higher education context. This quantitative study investigates how students' perceptions of peace education predict their reported levels of tolerance. Utilizing regression analysis of survey data collected from undergraduate students at both a Christian university (Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana) and an Islamic university (Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Results demonstrated that peace education significantly predicts tolerance, showing the strongest association with empathy (R-squared = 0.547), far outpacing its predictive power on fairness (29.7%) and reasonableness (48.1%). This reinforces the value of interactive and experiential pedagogies as strong statistical predictors of affective relational change. This high-capacity empathy constitutes the critical nexus for recognizing and honouring the inherent dignity of the religiously other, thereby fulfilling the theological imperative for reconciliation, depolarization, and co-creating holistic peace in a pluralistic society. The article concludes by emphasising the imperative for higher education to adopt empathy-centred curricula intentionally, thereby equipping graduates for relational human flourishing.

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1. Introduction

Intolerance among Indonesian youth is a growing concern, exacerbated by factors like radicalization. Murtadlo (2021) demonstrates that certain state universities have become breeding grounds for intolerance and radicalization. The National Counter Terrorism Agency (in Bahasa Indonesia: *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* [BNPT]) states that 7 state universities in Indonesia are exposed to intolerant and radical views (Mukhibat et al. 2024). Chaney and Sahoo (2020) further emphasized that radicalism leads to intolerant actions against democratic principles, freedom of opinion, and expression, as well as human rights. According to Mukhibat et al. (2024), intolerance in Indonesia is caused by an education system where educators are less equipped with training and professional development on teaching diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance in a plural society. This provides an overview of the state of affairs in education, especially higher education in Indonesia, which faces intolerance and radicalization problems. This needs to be a serious concern for many different stakeholders, and an in-depth study of this matter is required.

Educational institutions, particularly at the higher education level, are critical in addressing this issue by fostering interreligious tolerance through peace education. Fanani (2022) underlines that universities are the vanguard of peace education. In Indonesia, this is implemented in Tri Dharma, which refers to teaching, research, and community service. Core functions distinguish higher education from primary, secondary, and tertiary education. As for teaching, peace education can be applied in curriculum development, special courses, and adult education methods. The Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga (or UIN Sunan Kalijaga) offers peace education courses for undergraduates and a Master's degree in Religious Studies with a specialty in Conflict and Peace Studies. Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (or UKDW) provides undergraduate courses on peace education and, since 2014, has provided a Master's program in Conflict and Peace Studies, with specializations in practical theology and peace studies. In addition, a Master's program in Peace and Conflict Resolution was opened at Universitas Gadjah Mada in 2002 (Fanani 2022).

The main purpose of peace education is to cultivate in children, adolescents, and adults’ cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours promoting peaceful living. As stated by UNESCO (2005), peace education should be part of social, cultural, and national concerns. In this way, the blending of culturally anchored principles with universal human values may deepen peace education and improve its implementation proposals. Thus, peace education will finally be able to contribute properly to the development of a peaceful mind in people, giving them behaviours fit for harmonious living, to build a culture of peace and nonviolence (UNESCO 2005).

UNESCO’s World Heritage in Young Hands: An Educational Resource Kit for Teachers (1998) supports a three-legged stool for peace education: knowledge, attitudes, and skills (behaviour). Knowledge purports to impact conflict resolution, human rights, and cultural diversity so that students can reflect more critically about societal concerns and question preconceived ideas. It aims to enable the learning of attitudes that are particularly essential in building a common identity and respect: accountability, mutual understanding, and tolerance. These abilities include communication, negotiation, and problem-solving, which allow individuals to engage in productive talks, settle issues non-violently, and actively participate in the process of developing peaceful communities. Peace education includes all three dimensions, allowing individuals to become change agents for a more just and peaceful world (UNESCO 2005). Thus, peace education consists of three main components: cognitive knowledge, affective empathy, and psychomotor skills and conduct that help to develop a culture of peace (UNESCO 2005; Navarro-Castro and Norio-Galace 2008; Fanani 2022).

Effective peace education is designed with the culture or nation’s context in consideration (Salomon 2002; Harris 2002). Thus, Indonesian peace education has its origin in the country’s specific setting. According to Fanani (2022), the sociopolitical framework of Indonesia is based on the culture and self-perception of the Indonesian people as a friendly nation living in harmony and cooperation, known as *gotong-royong* in Bahasa Indonesia, with high religious values. But violence is also a phenomenon in Indonesia. This goes back to the transition period between the Old Order and the New Order, when political turmoil in the 1960s resulted in the killing of hundreds

of thousands of people believed to be Indonesian Communist Party members. In recent years, Fanani (2022) has pointed out that violence in Indonesian schools is very alarming, starting from bullying in elementary schools to physical fights between students and teachers in higher-order schools. This condition underlines how urgently peace education needs to be integrated into the Indonesian education system.

Several peace education researchers reflect a significant correlation between religious tolerance and a comprehensive educational approach. According to Smith (2010), peace education could provide a way for various religious groups to understand and tolerate each other. By appreciating cultural and political diversity, peace education could allow students to be more tolerant and reflective individuals (Smith 2010). Schulte (2022) emphasizes the crucial role of peace education in promoting a culture of nonviolence, peace, equality, and sustainability within the educational agenda.

This strong correlation between tolerance and peace education is further strengthened by several empirical studies. Roth and Sumarto (2015) investigated the impact of a large-scale educational initiative in Indonesia on the causal link between education and tolerance towards different races and religions. Their findings indicate that higher levels of education lead to increased interethnic and interreligious tolerance. In a related study, Rukiyanto et al. (2024) explored the role of religious education in higher education in Indonesia regarding respect for diversity among university students. Based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted with university students in Yogyakarta, the authors concluded that religious education plays a crucial role in fostering respect for plurality and promoting a positive attitude towards diversity among students.

The theory of tolerance, as defined by Rivka T. Witenberg (2019), provides a framework, highlighting three key components: justice (fairness), empathy, and rationality (reasonableness). Witenberg's (2019) study shows that tolerance has become an important research topic in an increasingly multicultural world. Due to migration and globalization, monocultural societies will fade away. Tolerance is needed when people are confronted with the fact that there are differences in various aspects of life based on ethnic

identity, race, religion, nationality, and so on. In 1995, UNESCO declared November 16 to be a Day of Tolerance and Peaceful Coexistence annually in memory of human rights and dignity (Witenberg 2019).

Witenberg (2019) argues that “tolerance is the conscious affirmation of favorable judgments and beliefs involving principles of justice, equality (fairness), care (empathy), and consideration for the plight of others (rationality)” (p. 5). Witenberg (2019) uses the lens of human developmental psychology to understand tolerance. She looks at how tolerance develops in young children, youths, adults, and senior citizens. According to Witenberg (2019), justice, empathy, and rationality are the three components on which tolerance has to be built. In an individual’s interactions with others, fairness is treating individuals equally and with a feeling of fair play, based on justice. Empathy is the capacity to comprehend and experience another person’s feelings, which results in actions that are helpful to people from all backgrounds. Empathy and conflict resolution are fostered by reasonableness, which encourages rational and open discussion among differing viewpoints (Witenberg 2019). Witenberg’s view resonates with Forst’s perspective (2013), namely that, in terms of tolerance, not only is an understanding that accepts differences required, but empathy is also required, especially towards individuals and groups who are different.

In this discourse on tolerance, Suhadi et al. (2018) proposed two terms that describe the characteristics of tolerance in Indonesia, namely costly tolerance and cheap tolerance, inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1994) thoughts on costly grace and cheap grace in Christian theology (Koffeman 2016). Cheap tolerance is only lip service and superficial, and is easily shaken because it does not describe a truly tolerant attitude towards different people and groups. Meanwhile, costly tolerance requires a willingness to accept one another fully, even to give up the power often attached to the majority group (Suhadi et al. 2018). Tolerance is a concept and practice that is still being debated, and there is no single definition either in the academic world or in society due to differences in views and beliefs from various individuals and religious groups. Increasing intolerance and social divides have posed challenges to communal harmony and human well-being (Volf 2011). This model of polarization destroys any possibility for diverse communities to live in peace,

thus negatively affecting the well-being of individuals and society alike. Religious organizations, and those that gather in community around churches or mosques, have a special role to play because conflict transformation is often about reinforcing values of tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect (Volf 2011; Lederach 2010).

Peace education has developed as a potent pedagogical strategy for fostering these social virtues that are vital to interfaith harmony (Reardon 2002). The affective capacity for empathy (the ability to feel what the other feels) that undergirds peaceful co-existence and relationship flourishing is deliberately cultivated through experiential and dialogical practices in peace education (Freire 1970). Developing empathy early in young adulthood suggests that religious contexts can build a bridge between those who are different and help to break down barriers of prejudice and ignorance (Eck 2000).

Christian theology of human flourishing has its foundation in the biblical thought on *Imago Dei* (meaning “image of God”) as it teaches that every person is created in the image and likeness of God, therefore endowed with inherent dignity and a relational calling (Grenz 2001; Volf 2011). This ontological foundation frames flourishing as a holistic existence that includes right relationships with God, self, others, and creation directed towards shalom, meaning of wholeness, peace, and well-being (Moltmann 2004). Or life with God as it was meant to be lived: in harmony with the purposes of God and agape love, which shows up among other places as compassion and neighbourly reconciliation (in a pluralistic society).

In Islamic theology, human well-being is also described as a holistic and multidimensional unfoldment of self, but with a focus on the development of moral (spiritual) virtues or *Husn-i-Akhlaaq* (character excellence) and the central role of humans as Khalifah (vicegerents) to care for the earth and ethical responsibility towards others (Nasr 2006; Kamali 2008). The concept of *Insan-i-Kamil* as a utopian type representing the end stage of spiritual and ethical growth, where well-being is to be had by observing divine commands and exemplifying justice and compassion in the community (Rahman 1980; Esposito 2011). Islamic prosperity incorporates maintaining the basic principles in *Maqasid al-Shariah* as well as social peace, honour, and

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balanced interaction of human life, both physical and spiritual (Kamali 2008; Ahmad 2020).

By using Witenberg’s (2019) dimensions of tolerance, which are fairness, empathy, and reasonableness, this research attempts to quantify the behaviours and attitudes of students in relationships with others from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. According to this theory, the development of students in terms of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness greatly contributes to enhancing their capacity for tolerance, with a view toward communal peaceful coexistence and inclusivity (Witenberg 2019).

This study aims to measure the predictive capacity of peace education programs on these aspects of tolerance. The main research question guiding this study is: to what extent is students’ perception of peace education associated with their reported attitudes and behaviours toward religious tolerance and peace in UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UKDW?

2. Method

This study utilized a quantitative approach, employing a survey with questionnaires. The survey includes questions about attitudes towards other religions, experiences with interreligious interactions, and knowledge of other religions after the respondents enrolled in the peace education courses. The closed-ended questions will use Likert scales to assess students’ levels of agreement with statements related to peace education and tolerance (Stockemer 2019).

The participants were undergraduate students from UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UKDW enrolled in specific peace education courses: 27 students of Social and Religious Conflict Resolution (*Resolusi Konflik Sosial dan Keagamaan*) and 30 students of Interreligious and Cultural Communication (*Komunikasi Lintas Agama dan Budaya*). At UKDW, the Peace Education (*Pendidikan Perdamaian*) course had 32 students during the even semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. For the validity and reliability test of the questionnaires, the respondents are from the Basic Civic Education (*Pendidikan Dasar Kewarganegaraan*) course in the even semester of 2024-2025, Faculty of

Divine Philosophy (Theology), UKDW, with as many as 44 respondents. The questionnaires were completed on each campus between May 23 and June 3, 2025, with a total of 103 students responding.

The independent variable was peace education, measured through indicators in the cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains. The dependent variable was tolerance, measured through the dimensions of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness. In accordance with institutional practices for non-medical educational research, formal committee ethics approval was not required; however, standard ethical procedures were followed. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and all responses were kept strictly anonymous.

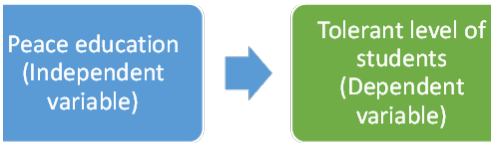


Figure 1 Variables of the Quantitative Research

Regression analysis is used to determine the strength and significance of the relationship between the variables. The analysis involved examining ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) to assess significance, and R-squared values to quantify the explanatory power of the model. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach’s Alpha value greater than 0.60 (Field 2013). The hypothesis considered for this regression model is that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral indicators of peace education are significant predictors of the dimensions of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness in tolerance.

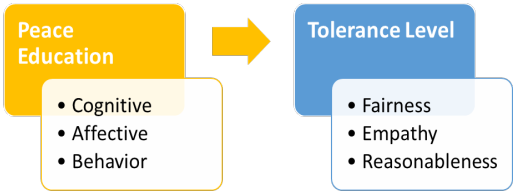


Figure 2. The dimensions of the independent and dependent variables

3. Result

Validity and reliability tests were carried out with student respondents in the Civic Education course in the even semester of 2024-2025, Faculty of Divine Philosophy (Theology), UKDW, with as many as 44 respondents, conducted on Tuesday, March 11, 2025, at 14:30 WIB. By using the Pearson Product-Moment analysis for the validity test, five invalid statements out of fifty statements were dropped from the questionnaire.

Independent variable reliability test results (x)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
0,745	20

Dependent variable reliability test results (y)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
0,750	30

According to Sujarweni (2014), if the Cronbach’s Alpha value is > 0.60 , the questionnaire is declared reliable.

The survey was conducted on UIN Sunan Kalijaga undergraduate students and UKDW who took peace education courses in the even semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. At UIN Sunan Kalijaga, there were courses on Social and Religious Conflict Resolution and Interfaith and Cultural Communication. At UKDW, there was a course in Peace Education. The questionnaires were completed on each campus between May 23 and 27, 2025, with a total of 103 students responding.

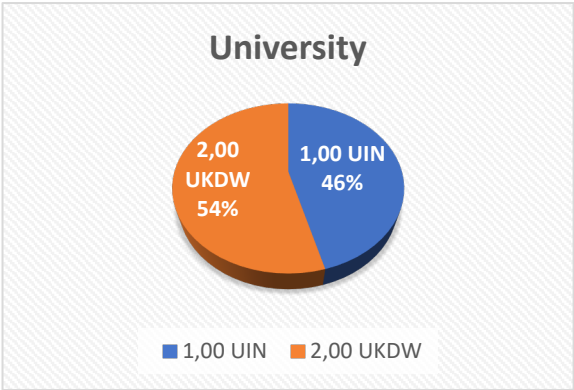


Figure 3. Respondents based on university

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be seen that of the total sample, 46% came from UIN, while the remaining 54% came from UKDW. Thus, UKDW had slightly more representatives than UIN.

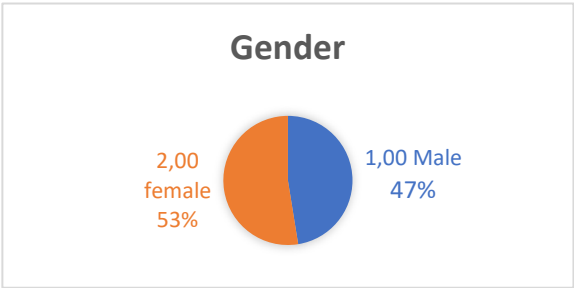


Figure 4. Respondents based on gender

Based on the pie chart presented, demographic data shows a fairly balanced gender difference. The blue section, representing males, has a percentage of 47%. Meanwhile, the orange section, representing females, has a slightly higher percentage of 53%. Overall, the female population is more dominant than the male population, although the difference is not significant.

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be concluded that of the total data available, 54% came from the Engineering department, while the remaining 46% came from the Religious Studies department. This shows that the number of respondents or subjects from the Engineering department was slightly higher than those from the Religious Studies department.

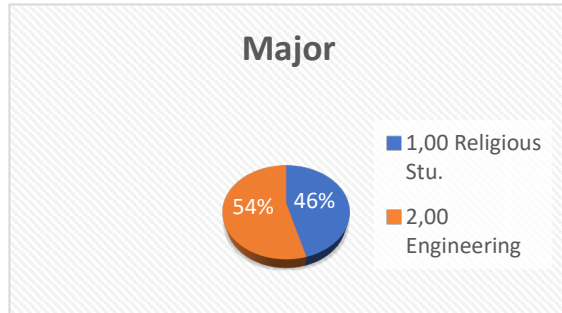


Figure 5. Respondents based on major

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be concluded that the majority of the data comes from respondents who are Muslim, accounting for 49%. The second largest group is Protestant, accounting for 39%, and the last is Catholic, accounting for 12%.

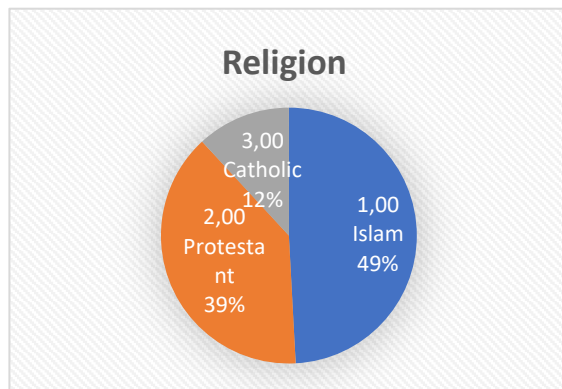


Figure 6. Respondents based on religion

Regression Analysis Result of Variables X and Y

The regression analysis results of the independent variable of peace education on the dependent variable tolerance show the ANOVA values (F) at 62.777 and Coefficients (t) at 7.923 with Sig. at 0.000, which means that the peace education variable is a statistically significant predictor of the tolerance variable. And the R-squared value of 0.524 illustrates that tolerance among the students studied is predicted by peace education by 52.4%.

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5450.289	1	5450.289	62.777	.000 ^b
	Residual	4948.694	57	86.819		
	Total	10398.983	58			
a. Dependent Variable: Toleransi						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Pendidikan_Perdamaian						

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.724 ^a	.524	.516	9.31768	1.813
a. Predictors: (Constant), Pendidikan_Perdamaian					
b. Dependent Variable: Toleransi					

Coefficients ^a							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	23.214	10.517		2.207	.031		
Pendidikan_Perdamaian	1.110	.140	.724	7.923	.000	1.000	1.000

Table 1. Table of Regression Results: Peace Education Dimensions on Tolerance Dimensions

Peace Education Dimensions (Independent Variables)	Dependent Variable (Tolerance Dimension)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Fairness	0.000 (Significant)	0.297	29.70%
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Empathy	0.000 (Significant)	0.547	54.70%
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Reasonableness	0.000 (Significant)	0.481	48.10%

The results of the regression analysis of the dimensions of peace education (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) on the dimensions of tolerance (Table 3), especially fairness, are shown by the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, indicating significance. The R-squared value for this analysis is 0.297. This means that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education specifically predict 29.7% of the tolerance dimension of student fairness.

In the regression analysis of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education on the empathy dimension of the tolerance variable, the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, meaning significant. The R-squared value in this analysis is 0.547. This shows that the empathy dimension of student tolerance is predicted by 54.7% by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education.

Regression analysis of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education on the reasonableness dimension of the tolerance variable shows the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, meaning significant. While the R-Squared value in this analysis is 0.481. This means that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education predict the reasonableness dimension of tolerance by 48.1%.

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing gender

Table 2. Table of Regression Results: Peace Education and Tolerance, Stratified by Gender

Gender	Independent Variables	Dependent Variable (Tolerance)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
Male	Peace Education	Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.488	48.80%
Female	Peace Education	Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.53	53.00%

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing male gender demographic data showed the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t), 0.000 means significant. As for male gender respondents, based on the R-Squared value of 0.488, it is found that the effect of peace education on tolerance is 48.8%. Variant regression analysis by distinguishing female gender demographic data showed the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. As for female gender respondents, based on the R-squared value of 0.530, it is found that the prediction of peace education on tolerance is 53%.

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing the university and the study program

Table 3. Regression Analysis Summary: Predictive Value of Peace Education on Tolerance by University and Study Program

University	Study Program	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable (Perception of Tolerance)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
UIN Sunan Kalijaga	Religious Studies	Peace Education	Perception of Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.618	61.80%

UKDW	Informatics Systems and Informatics Engineering	Peace Education	Perception of Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.458	45.80%
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In the regression analysis of UIN Sunan Kalijaga student respondents, it was found that the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. The R-squared value is 0.618, indicating that among students of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, the predictive relationship of peace education on their perception of tolerance is 61.8%. Note that these UIN students are from the Religious Studies program. In the regression analysis of UKDW student respondents, it was found that the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. The R-squared value is 0.458, indicating that among students of UKDW, the predictive relationship of peace education on their perception of tolerance is 45.8%. With a note that these UKDW students come from engineering study programs, namely system informatics and technical informatics.

4. Discussion

The findings present a substantial positive predictive relationship between peace education and tolerance, with 52.4% of the variation in tolerance among the students accounted for by peace education (ANOVA (F) and (t) sig. 0.000). This gives immediate meaning to the “to what extent” component of this research question, showing a clear and nearly half-influence relationship. The collective significant predictive relationship of peace education (52.4% effect) demonstrates that this structured and multi-faceted approach is effective in communicating knowledge and fostering tolerant attitudes (UNESCO 2005; Reardon 1988; Navarro-Castro and Norio-Galace 2008; Fanani 2022).

Influence across tolerance dimensions

Breaking down the variables, the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of peace education significantly predict individual elements of tolerance. Empathy is the most strongly predicted dimension, with 54.7% of

its variance explained by peace education. This suggests that peace education is highly effective in building students' ability to understand and share empathy, compassion, symbolic forgiveness, tolerance, and respect for people from different religions (Witenberg 2019). Reasonableness has a significant impact of 48.1%, revealing that peace education greatly influences students' ability for logical, just judgment, challenging prejudice, and open-mindedness on interreligious relations (Witenberg 2019). Fairness, although still significantly predicted, has a lesser R-squared of 29.7%. This suggests that peace education plays a role in students' perception of fairness, equality, and non-discrimination (Witenberg 2019), albeit relatively low compared to other dimensions. It might be related to the cultural aspect of Indonesian society, as there is no direct translation of the term "fairness" in Bahasa Indonesia. The greatest predictive capacity of peace education is the empathy factor (54.7%). Such a strong predictive capacity on empathy indicates that pedagogical methods with a focus on direct interfaith encounters and experiential learning are especially effective, as empathy is usually fostered through genuine interaction and familiarity with the other's worldview.

In order to comprehend why these results are produced, the actual teaching practices within the classroom need to be considered. The peace education classes that have been studied do not confine themselves merely to lecturing, but incorporate more practical learning approaches, such as interfaith dialogue exercises, direct contacts with civil society, case studies, cross-cultural site visits, collaborative work with NGOs, and journal writing. Instead of looking at issues related to peace and tolerance in an abstract way, these practical and interactive teaching practices force students to face different religious, social, and cultural views. These kinds of teaching practices transform the learning experience from a cognitive one to an affective one, thereby creating the rationale behind the correlation between peace education and tolerance's empathy component.

Influence across gender demographics

The analysis also reveals nuanced differences across gender: For female students, peace education accounts for 53% of the variation in tolerance. For male students, the effect is slightly lower, at 48.8%. Both are significant,

suggesting that peace education is effective across genders, but marginally more impactful on female students’ tolerance levels in this sample. This suggests a deeper reflection on the role of gender balance in promoting tolerance and peace. These statistics show that women are more tolerant in interfaith relations; hence, women merit a greater role in promoting tolerance and peace in both academic and societal contexts.

Influence across study programs and universities

A key result arises from the university-level analyses. In UIN Sunan Kalijaga, where students are taking the Religious Studies program, peace education explains a very large 61.8% of the variance in tolerance. This suggests that the environment and content of a religious studies program can be very conducive to the predictive capacity of peace education on tolerance. In contrast, at UKDW, where the students come from engineering study fields (System Informatics and Technical Informatics), the predictive capacity stands at 45.8%. This difference highlights the potential role of the academic discipline and its inherent focus (or lack thereof) on interreligious dialogue and societal dynamics in influencing the effectiveness of peace education. Students already enrolled in religious studies are more receptive to or exposed to concepts that more readily reflect peace education goals, or that the very design of curriculum within religious studies programs inherently embraces peace education principles more essentially. This confirms the contextual dynamics in designing and implementing peace education, whereby peace education must be developed in a specific context in accordance with the circumstances faced by the learners (Salomon 2002, Harris 2002).

The significant overall predictive capacity, particularly at UIN (61.8%), where the theological basis is well-established, is proof of the effectiveness of this founding approach. The far greater predictive capacity of peace education in the Religious Studies program (61.8%) compared to Engineering programs (45.8%) indicates the seriousness and applicability of the study field and its natural alignment with peace education’s objectives. Religious Studies students may arrive at university with a higher baseline of tolerance formation and theological sensitivity, making them uniquely receptive to peace education literacies. Programs that necessarily include intergroup

relations, ethics, and social justice may provide a more fertile ground on which peace education can flourish and provide larger, quantifiable returns in tolerance.

Peace education as a pedagogic basis for empathy cultivation

Peace education is one of the important pedagogical instruments to develop empathy, which is a fundamental affective competence in promoting tolerance and social cohesiveness in diverse societies (Reardon 2002). Through involving learners in experiential, dialogical, and participatory approaches, peace education exceeds simple knowledge acquisition for the developmental process of emotive and moral development (Freire 1970; Sagkal 2012). These pedagogical strategies are specifically designed to foster empathic ability, which is defined as the ability to perceive and share the emotions of others, to elicit prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, altruism, and conflict resolution (Feshbach & Feshbach 2009; Dovidio et al. 2003).

Since peace education is designed to unite the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of human existence, it helps students to understand the other in an empathic manner and react compassionately when encountering pluralism (UNESCO 2005). This comprehensive development of peace literacies permits learners to actively engage and work towards the task of creating societal *shalom* and *Ihsan* (personal engagement in moral conduct), embodying human flourishing within the school and beyond.

Interpreting empathy in an interreligious context

The central finding of this study, that peace education, through especially the use of interactive and experiential pedagogies, has the most substantial predictive capacity on the empathy dimension of tolerance ($R\text{-squared} = 0.547$), deserves close theological and anthropological interpretation. This strong correlation indicates that when students are more actively engaged in processes that facilitate perspective-taking and affective resonance, the resulting change manifests most clearly as a developed capacity for empathy. Crucially, this empirical result provides a robust validation for the theoretical framework established in the literature review: namely, the concept that

empathy serves as a virtue in honoring the *Imago Dei* and its parallel conceptions of human dignity in Islam.

From a Christian theological perspective, the most widely accepted interpretations of the *Imago Dei* are structural, that is to say, inherent rationality or moral capacity, functional, or humanity’s delegated role as God’s stewards over creation, and relational. It is the relational interpretation that most deeply intersects with the concept of empathy. If the Image of God is understood not merely as a trait a person possesses, but as a calling toward relationality, as a reflection of the Triune God’s communal nature, then our ethical obligation is to see and honor this image in the other.

Although *Imago Dei* is a term specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition, its ethical function nonetheless finds a deep parallel in the Islamic tradition relating to human dignity, or *karāmah*, and the doctrine of vicegerency, or *khalīfa*. This God-given honor, or *karāmah*, endows all human beings with a certain inviolable worth regardless of creed or social status. The concept of *khalīfa*, or vicegerent/steward, places humanity as God’s representative on earth, tasked with the maintenance of justice, the care of creation, and the flourishing of community. Empathy, in this context, becomes the indispensable moral tool by which that task is accomplished. Without the ability to feel the plight and understand the perspective of the other, a person cannot enact true justice or maintain communal cohesion. For that reason, the success of peace education in developing empathy among the students demonstrates that such pedagogical approaches have the effectiveness to develop the level of moral sensitivity. Empathy translates the abstract theological imperative to honor humanity into concrete, ethical action; it serves as the bridge between divine decree and lived experience.

The shared emphasis on inherent human dignity (*Imago Dei* and *karāmah*) across both Christian and Islamic traditions makes empathy the critical nexus for genuine interreligious peace education. The empirical findings in the study emphasize that through the focus on shared human experience serving as the common ground in which empathy is practiced, peace education indeed moves students beyond functional tolerance, characterized by ideas of fairness and reasonableness, to a more valuing position vis-à-vis the person.

This is the shift from functional tolerance to affective empathy that is essential. It ensures that peace is built not on pragmatic compromise but on a fundamental, theologically grounded conviction of shared, sacred human worth—in other words, the necessary foundation for relational human flourishing in a pluralistic Indonesian context.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how students' perceptions of peace education pedagogical methods relate to affective and cognitive dimensions of religious tolerance within Indonesian higher education. Utilizing a quantitative approach in both a Christian university, UKDW, and an Islamic one, UIN, all situated in Yogyakarta, the findings provide strong evidence with respect to the predictive capacity of peace education. The first conclusion established from the regression analysis is that peace education significantly predicts religious tolerance along its various dimensions. Crucially, its predictive relationship on the empathy dimension was the highest R-squared of 0.547, appreciably surpassing the predictive power on reasonableness and fairness dimensions with R-squared values of 0.481 and 0.297, respectively. This means that the experiential, interactive, and dialogical pedagogies employed in peace education possess a profound predictive capacity regarding relational change at an affective level, rather than merely predicting cognitive or functional compliance.

Theologically, this empirical outcome provides a powerful affirmation of the theoretical framework. The development of empathy is the practical, lived expression of honouring the inherent dignity of the human person. For Christians, this is rooted in the relational interpretation of the *Imago Dei* whereby seeing and valuing the other is an act of recognizing and affirming God's image in them, with movement toward shared peace and relational human flourishing. In Islam, this empathy-driven recognition fulfills the mandates of human dignity (*karāmah*) and vicegerency (*khalīfa*), assuring justice and communal cohesion in a way that bridges abstract theological honour with concrete ethical sensitivity. Empathy, therefore, stands as the

critical interreligious virtue as the nexus through which shared human dignity is realized and protected in a pluralistic society.

While this study indeed provides evidence base for peace education, several limitations remain. The cross-sectional design will not allow causal inferences beyond students’ perceptions. Future research will need to adopt longitudinal studies or controlled trials to determine more precisely the longer-term predictive capacity and sustainability of these gains in empathy. Qualitative work that focuses on the lived experience of the students of these interactive pedagogies in understanding how their theological understanding of dignity shifts through empathetic engagement will situate these quantitative findings in a rich context.

6. Declarations

Funding statement

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Data availability statement

The survey data collected and analyzed in this study (N = 103) have limited demographic information and were provided by respondents who signed informed consent forms; therefore, the data are not publicly available to protect the respondents’ privacy. However, the corresponding author can provide anonymized data and the complete analysis results upon written request accompanied by a data-sharing agreement. Aggregate results and tables are available in this article.

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Declaration of interests statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval statement

All survey participants provided their informed consent for publication at the beginning of the survey. Their data were reported anonymously.

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L'éducation comme moralisation et humanisation de l'homme selon Emmanuel Kant

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Juin 2026

Mots clés

Immanuel Kant, philosophie de l'éducation, anthropologie de l'éducation, éducation et métaphysique, perspective historique sur l'éducation au 18^e siècle, éducation et fondement éthique.

Résumé

Le présent article porte sur la conception kantienne de l'éducation. Il a pour but de promouvoir l'éducation dans le monde d'aujourd'hui. Trois questions résument, en quelque sorte, le contenu de l'article : qu'est-ce que l'éducation ? Pourquoi l'éducation ? Quelles sont ses conditions de possibilité ? L'éducation est une nécessité pour l'homme selon Kant. La raison en est que l'homme vient au monde à l'état brut ; il n'a pas de nature, il doit encore créer sa propre identité. C'est pour cela que l'homme doit être éduqué. Nous ne devons pas négliger l'éducation parce que l'homme « *n'est que ce que l'éducation fait de lui* », dit Kant. L'éducation est nécessaire pour devenir pleinement homme. C'est un processus d'humanisation de l'être humain. Elle a pour but d'aider l'enfant à devenir de plus en plus homme et à passer de son animalité à l'humanité. Ce passage est possible parce que l'homme est à la fois perfectible et libre. Éduquer signifie concrètement développer ses propres capacités et transmettre des valeurs, ce qui n'a de sens, dans le cadre kantien, que si le projet anthropologique est durable.

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1. Introduction

Une question vient à l'esprit dès qu'on parle du rapport entre l'éducation et la morale chez Kant : y a-t-il une place pour l'éducation dans la philosophie kantienne ? Quant à la morale, beaucoup savent qu'il en parle aussi bien dans la *Critique de la raison pratique* que dans les *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*. En fait, si Kant est devenu célèbre, c'était grâce à sa conception morale. Il en est de même pour le problème de la connaissance. Historiquement nous savons que l'un des buts de la philosophie, d'après Kant, consiste à répondre à la question : *que puis-je connaître* ? Pour dire que la morale, la connaissance et la religion sont les thèmes majeurs abordés par le philosophe de Königsberg. Mais quand on parle de l'éducation, on a l'impression qu'il n'en parle pas beaucoup. Beaucoup ne savent même pas qu'il a publié un livre sur l'éducation¹. Il importe cependant de souligner que l'éducation est aussi l'une des préoccupations kantiennes, mais elle est un peu méconnue. Et c'est pour cela justement que nous avons décidé de réfléchir sur la conception kantienne de l'éducation, c'est-à-dire de son rapport avec la morale. Il s'agit de voir le rapport entre les deux.

Beaucoup de philosophes ont déjà parlé du rapport entre l'éducation et la morale. Olivier Reboul (1925-1992), auteur de *La philosophie de l'éducation*, a déjà abordé ce problème. Il soutient, aussi bien dans *La philosophie de l'éducation* que dans *Les valeurs de l'éducation*, que la morale et l'éducation sont intimement liées et qu'elles ne doivent pas être séparées. D'après lui, en effet, l'éducation n'est pas une simple transmission des connaissances, elle est un moyen qui nous permet de vivre selon les valeurs. Éduquer signifie concrètement transmettre des valeurs². Le but de l'éducation n'est autre que la transmission des valeurs. La négligence de ces dernières, dans le domaine de l'éducation, est un danger pour la société. D'après ce philosophe, en effet, il n'y a pas d'éducation sans valeurs. Dans *Les valeurs de l'éducation*, il dit même que les valeurs n'ont jamais quitté le monde de l'éducation ; elles sont

¹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, trad. d'Alexis Philonenko, J. Vrin, Paris, 2018.

² Cf. Reboul, *Philosophie de l'éducation*, PUF, Paris, 2018, pp.114-118.

considérées comme un *sacré* pour la société³. En leur absence, la vie en société n’est pas possible⁴. Voilà pourquoi les éducateurs doivent accorder beaucoup d’importance à toutes les valeurs ; elles nous permettent de maintenir l’ordre et la cohésion sociale. L’éducation vise non seulement l’épanouissement de l’individu, mais aussi celui de la société⁵. Bref, l’éducation doit avoir une dimension sociale. Elle a pour but d’aider l’enfant à développer son esprit critique, à s’intégrer dans la société et à devenir autonome. Reboul valorise l’éducation, parce qu’elle est importante aussi bien pour l’individu que pour la société.

C’est la dimension sociale de l’éducation qui importe dans la perspective de ce philosophe français : l’éducation doit favoriser la vie intérieure de l’individu et le développement de la société. Cela exige la participation des éducateurs et celle de l’enfant. D’après lui, en effet, les parents et les éducateurs doivent aider l’enfant à avoir une autonomie en morale. Cette conception reboulienne de l’éducation rejoint la distinction allemande entre *Erziehung* et *Bildung*. Ces deux mots indiquent, en effet, les deux dimensions de l’éducation. Le mot *Erziehung* signifie éducation au sens strict. Soulignons cependant que l’on parle ici de l’éducation donnée de l’extérieur. Elle est considérée comme œuvre des parents et des éducateurs seulement. Ce sont eux qui s’occupent de l’éducation par la discipline, l’encadrement et la moralisation etc. Bref, l’éducation n’est pas tellement l’œuvre de l’enfant, mais celle de l’autorité : les parents, les éducateurs et la société etc. C’est pour cette raison justement que les Allemands emploient le terme *Bildung* pour désigner la participation active de l’enfant à sa propre formation. En fait, *Bildung* indique la formation intérieure et personnelle de l’individu. Ce qui importe dans cette définition, c’est la participation de l’individu à sa propre formation. Il est en quelque sorte responsable de son propre épanouissement. On n’insiste plus sur le rôle des éducateurs et des parents, mais sur celui de l’individu. L’enfant essaie de développer toutes ses capacités pour avoir l’autonomie. Les autres ne doivent pas être un obstacle pour l’enfant dans sa

³ Cf. Reboul, *La philosophie de l’éducation*, PUF, Paris, 2018, p.114.

⁴ Cf. Reboul, *Op. Cit.*, p.25.

⁵ Cf. Reboul, *Op Cit.*, pp.24-26.

quête d'autonomie. Bref, si les Allemands emploient les termes *Erziehung* et *Bildung* pour parler de l'éducation, c'est parce que celle-ci ne consiste pas seulement à recevoir une formation, mais aussi à se former soi-même. L'éducation authentique suppose que l'individu contribue activement à son propre épanouissement individuel, moral et culturel. On insiste sur ce rapport de complémentarité, parce que l'éducation et la morale ne doivent pas être séparées.

Une phrase de Victor Hugo vient aussi à l'esprit lorsqu'on évoque le rapport entre l'éducation et la morale. « *Ouvrir une école, c'est fermer la prison* ». Cela signifie qu'il y a un rapport étroit entre l'éducation et la morale. Il s'agit d'un rapport de dépendance : tout ce qui se passe en prison dépend de la qualité de l'éducation que l'on dispense à l'école. Si l'on veut que les hommes n'aillent pas en prison, il faut construire des écoles. Plus précisément, on doit revaloriser l'éducation. C'est par la revalorisation de l'éducation que nous pouvons construire un monde meilleur ; sa négligence est un danger aussi bien pour la famille que pour la nation : « *Si vous voulez détruire un pays, inutile de lui faire une guerre sanglante (...). Il suffit de détruire son système d'éducation et d'y généraliser la corruption* », disait un sage chinois. Cela signifie que nous ne devrions pas minimiser l'importance de l'éducation. L'éducation est un moyen qui nous permet d'éviter les actes de barbarie. Tout dépend de l'éducation. Et c'est pour cela justement que Kant insiste aussi sur l'importance de l'éducation. L'éducation morale est un besoin fondamental de l'être humain d'après lui ; c'est une nécessité pour l'homme.

2. Le pourquoi de l'éducation selon Kant

Ce qui m'a beaucoup frappé chez Kant, c'est sa conception de l'éducation. L'éducation n'est pas facultative d'après lui ; il s'agit plutôt d'un besoin fondamental lié à la nature même de l'homme. Plus précisément l'éducation est une exigence même de la nature humaine ; c'est le fait d'être homme qui l'exige. Un homme sans éducation n'est pas un homme authentique. Kant le dit clairement : « *L'homme ne peut devenir homme que par l'éducation.*

Il n'est que ce que l'éducation fait de lui »⁶. Sur le plan moral, Rousseau parle de la bonté naturelle de l’homme ; il soutient l’idée selon laquelle l’homme est né bon, c’est la société qui le déprave. Kant ne partage pas ce point de vue de Rousseau. Dans les *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, en effet, il affirme que l’homme n’est ni bon ni mauvais moralement⁷. On ne naît pas bon ou mauvais, on le devient. La bonté ou la méchanceté est en effet une question morale d’après Kant ; elle dépend donc de la liberté ou de la volonté de chacun. Tout dépend de l’éducation d’après lui. Un enfant sans éducation peut rester enfant jusqu’à la fin de sa vie, parce que c’est l’éducation qui fait de lui un homme. On ne devient pleinement homme que par l’éducation. C’est cette conception de l’éducation qui constitue l’originalité de la philosophie kantienne. Il nous rappelle que l’éducation ne doit pas être minimisée ; elle est le propre de l’homme.

La conception kantienne de l’homme et celle des existentialistes se rejoignent ici. Les existentialistes soutiennent l’idée selon laquelle l’homme n’a pas de nature prédéfinie ; il doit encore créer sa nature. Dans son livre *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Sartre soutient, par exemple, que l’homme n’est pas un être, mais une possibilité d’être. Sa nature n’est pas prédéfinie comme celle des animaux. En fait, nous ne pouvons pas définir l’homme d’après la perspective existentialiste, parce qu’il n’a pas d’identité ; il n’est rien d’abord⁸ ; il n’est qu’un « néant » selon le vocabulaire de Sartre. Et si l’homme est un « néant », il doit encore créer petit à petit sa propre nature, c’est-à-dire son identité. Kant partage ce point de vue existentialiste dans sa conception de l’homme et de l’éducation. D’après lui, la bonté ou la méchanceté n’est pas naturelle ; c’est plutôt une question de choix ou de liberté. C’est par l’éducation seulement que l’homme peut devenir pleinement homme. Rendre un homme plus homme n’est pourtant pas facile, et c’est pour cela que Kant nous parle des problèmes de l’éducation.

⁶ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, trad d’A. Philonenko, J. Vrin, Paris, 2018, p.98.

⁷ Cf. Kant, *Op Cit*, p.189.

⁸ Cf. Sartre, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, Ed. Gallimard, 1996, p.29.

3. Les problèmes de l'éducation

Kant dit que « l'éducation est le plus grand et le plus difficile problème qui puisse être proposé à l'homme⁹. » Éduquer n'est pas facile parce que l'homme a deux natures : la nature sensible et la nature intelligible, comme phénomène soumis aux lois naturelles et comme être intelligible capable de liberté. Cette distinction constitue l'une des réponses kantienne aux dualismes hérités de la métaphysique classique, notamment au conflit entre déterminisme naturel et liberté morale.

À cause de son appartenance au monde sensible, il se laisse parfois guider par son animalité, car c'est aussi le terrain où la liberté doit se réaliser. Mais grâce à sa nature raisonnable, il a une destination morale : « *L'homme est destiné par sa raison [...] à se moraliser. Sa raison le destine [...] à se rendre digne de l'humanité* »¹⁰. À vrai dire, il doit se moraliser en passant de son animalité à l'humanité. Or, c'est l'éducation qui rend possible ce passage. Voilà pourquoi l'éducation peut être considérée comme une moralisation de l'enfant chez Kant. À l'inverse, la sensibilité n'est pas seulement le terrain qui rend possible la liberté humaine, c'est aussi une ouverture positive dans la relation à l'autre, qui dans les sentiments moraux forme un ressort essentiel à l'histoire et la culture humaine.

Une question persiste cependant de la perspective kantienne de l'exercice de la liberté humaine : l'éducation peut-elle rester morale sans se réduire à une moralisation de l'homme, vu depuis le cadre adapté à l'éducation dans l'enfance ? Il est difficile de répondre à cette question sans connaître au préalable la signification de l'éducation dans la tradition allemande.

D'après ce que nous avons déjà dit, l'éducation a deux dimensions complémentaires à l'époque de Kant : *Erziehung* et *Bildung*. Le premier terme indique l'éducation au sens strict du terme. Ici, c'est bien de l'enfant qu'on parle, et il dépend totalement des autres : les parents, les éducateurs, la

⁹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.105.

¹⁰ Kant, *Anthropologie. Du point de vue pragmatique*, J. Vrin, Paris, 1988, p. 164.

société, l’Église etc. La formation morale en revanche dépasse le problème de la nature de l’enfant prise de manière inconsciente dans son animalité, selon l’expression de Hegel, qui vient compléter la perspective kantienne. Ici, l’éducation intellectuelle et la transmission des valeurs et des règles ne dépendent pas de l’effort personnel de l’enfant, mais de l’action des autres et des choix éthiques de la personne. Bref, tandis que l’individu enfant ne fait que recevoir ce qui vient de l’extérieur ; il n’est pas responsable de sa propre éducation. L’autonomie requise par la morale kantienne repose sur une prise en compte de stades de développement de l’être humain hors de sa nature individuelle enfantine ou adolescente : elle pose les fondements du sujet juridique et du citoyen, ainsi que l’articulera *l’Introduction à la philosophie du droit* hégélien.

Au contraire de l’éducation en ce premier sens, c’est l’autoformation qui compte davantage dans la notion de *Bildung*. L’individu prend en main sa propre éducation. Il ne dépend plus des autres ; il devient de plus en plus autonome dans tous les domaines. Son rôle consiste à développer personnellement toutes ses facultés intellectuelles, morales et spirituelles. Son épanouissement dépend de lui-même. Bref, la notion de *Bildung* indique le processus par lequel chacun est l’auteur de sa propre éducation. Cela peut se poursuivre tout au long de la vie, car chacun peut continuellement développer sa culture et sa personnalité.

Même s’il y a une certaine nuance entre ces deux dimensions de l’éducation, nous voudrions soutenir qu’elles sont complémentaires. Elles ne doivent pas être séparées, parce qu’en matière d’éducation, l’individu ne peut se passer des autres, et il doit aussi avoir une certaine autonomie. La dépendance à l’égard des autres a pour finalité l’autonomie morale. La dépendance n’est pas une fin en soi dans le domaine de l’éducation. Et Kant s’inspire justement de cette conception dans son programme éducatif. En fait, ce philosophe parle non seulement de la dépendance de l’enfant, mais aussi de son autonomie. Il ne minimise pas du tout le rôle des parents et des éducateurs dans la moralisation de l’enfant, mais ce dernier doit graduellement devenir autonome après ; la personne adulte éducateur inversement pose la perspective de l’enfant, et l’aide à résoudre les défis propres à son développement.

Quant au problème de la réduction de l'éducation à une simple moralisation de l'homme, la lecture des œuvres de Kant nous permet de le résoudre. Rappelons d'abord que la morale est l'une des préoccupations kantienne. Dans la *Logique*, il pose la question : que dois-je faire ? Cela montre déjà qu'il ne minimise pas la morale. C'est pour cela qu'il a consacré deux ouvrages à la morale : les *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs* et *La critique de la raison pratique*. L'auteur y développe que l'homme, en tant qu'être raisonnable, doit se moraliser et que cette moralisation s'effectue par l'éducation. Cela ne signifie pourtant pas que l'éducation se réduit à une simple moralisation de l'homme selon Kant. Il soutient que pour devenir pleinement homme, chacun a aussi besoin de vivre selon les vertus. Plus précisément, il a besoin de cultiver ou de développer toutes ses vertus intellectuelles, morales et culturelles etc. C'est dans la *Doctrine de la vertu* que l'auteur développe tout cela. Pour notre épanouissement, il nous invite, par exemple, à cultiver toutes les vertus sociales comme la politesse, l'hospitalité, la courtoisie¹¹ etc. Il dit que « *c'est un devoir même aussi bien envers soi-même qu'envers autrui que de pousser le commerce des hommes les uns avec les autres avec ses perfections morales [...] de ne pas s'isoler [...]* »¹². Les vertus de société sont importantes, parce qu'elles favorisent la joie et facilitent l'accomplissement du devoir. L'éthique kantienne a, en effet, une dimension esthétique ; le beau et le bien sont intimement liés ; l'esthétique est au service de la morale.

Tout cela nous montre que Kant ne sépare pas les deux dimensions de l'éducation : *Erziehung* et *Bildung*. D'un côté, il insiste sur l'importance du rôle des éducateurs dans l'éducation de l'enfant, mais de l'autre, il invite chacun à développer personnellement ses talents et ses capacités. Les deux dimensions sont complémentaires ; on ne peut oublier ni l'une ni l'autre. Eduquer un enfant ne consiste pas seulement à le moraliser, mais aussi à l'aider à vivre selon les vertus. Rappelons tout simplement qu'en matière

¹¹ Cf. Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs : doctrine de la vertu*, pp.151-152.

¹² Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs : doctrine de la vertu*, p.151.

d’éducation, la moralisation de l’enfant constitue une tâche difficile selon Kant.

D’après lui, en effet, éduquer l’enfant signifie le rendre plus homme. Plus précisément, éduquer veut dire aider l’enfant à passer de l’animalité à l’humanité. L’éducation est nécessaire parce que la destination de l’homme est l’humanité¹³ : c’est une destination morale. Au nom de la moralité, l’homme doit respecter l’humanité dans sa propre personne. Le respect de l’humanité se traduit par la soumission aux lois de la raison. Cela n’est pourtant pas facile, parce que l’homme est doué de liberté et il abuse souvent de cette dernière. Au lieu de se soumettre aux lois de la raison, l’homme se laisse guider par sa nature sensible. Par conséquent, il dévie facilement de sa destination morale. Et c’est pour cette raison justement que l’homme doit être éduqué. Le rôle de l’éducateur consiste à aider l’enfant à fixer le regard sur sa destination morale et à éviter toute déviation. Des questions se posent cependant : que faire pour y arriver ? Qui pourrait s’occuper de l’éducation des enfants ? Un homme affecté par la grossièreté de sa nature pourrait-il vraiment se charger de l’éducation des autres ?

Répondre à ces questions n’est pas du tout facile. Soulignons d’abord qu’aux yeux de Kant, l’enfant doit passer de l’animalité à l’humanité. La raison en est qu’il « *vient au monde à l’état brut*¹⁴ » ; il n’est qu’un être en puissance selon l’expression d’Aristote et doit devenir de plus en plus homme. Pour y parvenir, l’enfant a besoin d’un maître, et c’est cela qui fait problème dans le domaine de l’éducation. Des problèmes se posent parce que l’éducateur est aussi un homme comme les autres. Il a cependant pour tâche de « *produire chez l’autre ce dont il a lui-même besoin*¹⁵. » Son rôle consiste à aider l’autre à passer de l’animalité à l’humanité alors qu’il est lui-même affecté par « *la grossièreté de sa nature*¹⁶. » Il se peut donc que l’éducateur dévie aussi de sa destination morale à cause de sa nature animale. Cela signifie que l’éducateur

¹³ Cf. Kant, *Op Cit*, p.95.

¹⁴ Kant, *Op Cit*, p.94.

¹⁵ Kant, *Anthropologie*, trad. Michel Foucault, J. Vrin, Paris, 1988, p.164.

¹⁶ Kant, *Anthropologie*, ibid. p.164.

a aussi besoin d'un éducateur comme les autres. Mais qui va éduquer les éducateurs ? Un homme qui a été éduqué pourrait-il se charger de l'éducation des autres?

Tel est le plus grand problème de l'éducation selon Kant. Ce problème ne se poserait pas si un être supérieur se chargeait de l'éducation. Mais pour la simple raison que c'est toujours un homme qui éduque un autre, le problème de l'éducation reste insoluble. Mais malgré ces difficultés, le philosophe de Königsberg propose des moyens qui permettent à l'homme de passer de ce qu'il est à ce qu'il doit être. Il accorde beaucoup d'importance à l'éducation et soutient même que l'homme ne peut devenir vraiment homme que par l'éducation. L'éducation est, en effet, le processus par lequel l'homme s'humanise.

4. L'éducation, un moyen permettant à l'homme de devenir pleinement homme

Kant dit clairement dans les *Réflexions sur l'éducation* : « *L'homme est la seule créature qui doit être éduquée. Par éducation on entend en effet les soins (l'alimentation, l'entretien), la discipline, et l'instruction avec la formation* »¹⁷. Les animaux n'ont pas besoin de tout cela parce qu'ils sont déjà ce qu'ils doivent être. Kant souligne que même si les animaux sont encore petits, ils ont déjà une certaine autonomie et sont capables de se protéger et de se débrouiller dans la vie¹⁸. D'après lui, si les animaux n'ont pas besoin d'éducation, c'est parce que leur nature est différente de celle de l'homme. Ils sont guidés par la nature, et comme le dit Kant, « *par son instinct un animal est déjà tout ce qu'il peut être ; une raison étrangère a déjà pris soin de tout pour lui* »¹⁹. Plus précisément, tout est déjà en acte chez les animaux ; ils sont achevés et les qualités virtuelles n'existent plus. Mais il n'en est pas ainsi pour l'être humain ; l'homme n'est pas encore achevé. Il a

¹⁷ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.93.

¹⁸ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.93.

¹⁹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.94.

beaucoup de potentialités et de qualités, mais elles sont encore virtuelles et doivent être développées pour que l’homme puisse atteindre sa véritable destination²⁰. L’homme a la possibilité de devenir pleinement homme ; tout dépend cependant de lui ; il est responsable de son destin. S’il veut devenir plus homme, il doit développer toutes ses dispositions naturelles, parce que « *la Providence ne les a pas mises en lui toutes achevées* »²¹. Et c’est pour cela justement que l’homme doit être éduqué. L’éducation est une nécessité pour lui. Elle joue un rôle important dans l’humanisation de l’homme. C’est la raison pour laquelle Kant dit : « *l’homme ne peut devenir homme que par l’éducation. Il n’est que ce que l’éducation fait de lui*²². » Il s’agit là vraiment d’une nouvelle conception de l’éducation. Sa conception de l’éducation dépend de sa conception de l’homme. Contrairement à Aristote et à Descartes, en effet, Kant refuse de penser le sujet comme une substance. Dans son ouvrage *De l’âme*, Aristote dit, par exemple, que l’homme est composé d’une âme et d’un corps. Il soutient cependant que ces deux éléments constituent une seule substance.

De même, Descartes définit l’homme comme une substance. Le sujet n’est qu’une substance pensante²³ d’après lui, sa nature est de penser. Le sujet cartésien est connaissable ; c’est le fait de penser qui le fait exister. D’où *le je pense, donc je suis*²⁴. Pour Kant, au contraire, le sujet n’est pas du tout une substance que l’on peut connaître. Le sujet n’est pas le moi empirique étudié par la psychologie. Identifier le sujet kantien à une substance pensante connaissable en elle-même est une erreur. C’est pour cela qu’il fait la distinction entre le moi empirique et le moi transcendantal. Le moi empirique est un objet d’expérience, et nous pouvons le connaître. Mais le moi transcendantal reste inconnaissable. Nous pouvons le penser, mais nous ne pouvons pas le connaître. Le sujet kantien en tant que moi transcendantal rend possible toute connaissance, mais il reste inconnaissable. C’est pour cela que

²⁰ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.102.

²¹ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.104.

²² Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.98.

²³ Cf. Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, p.99.

²⁴ Cf. Descartes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 93.

Kant conteste le passage du « je pense » au « je suis une substance pensante », que Descartes considère comme légitime dans les *Méditations métaphysiques*. Dans cette conception du sujet, Kant est aussi l'auteur d'une révolution semblable à celle de Copernic. Il nous propose une nouvelle conception de l'homme, qui influence sa conception de l'éducation. La bonté morale dépend de l'éducation, mais l'éducation dépend de la liberté et de la perfectibilité de l'homme.

5. La liberté et la perfectibilité, conditions de possibilité de l'éducation

Même si Kant s'écarte de Rousseau à propos de la bonté naturelle de l'homme, il se rapproche de lui dans sa conception de la liberté et de la perfectibilité. Tous les deux soutiennent que deux choses rendent possible l'éducation : la liberté et la perfectibilité de l'homme. L'éducation est possible parce que l'homme est à la fois libre et perfectible. Il y en a qui disent que c'est la raison ou l'intelligence qui nous distingue des animaux. Rousseau ne partage pas tellement ce point de vue. D'après lui, c'est la liberté d'abord qui constitue la différence spécifique de l'homme²⁵. Rousseau ne rejette pas l'idée selon laquelle l'homme est un animal raisonnable, il dit tout simplement que ce n'est pas tellement la raison qui nous distingue des animaux, mais la liberté et la perfectibilité. Et si l'éducation est possible d'après lui, c'est parce que l'homme est à la fois libre et perfectible. Ces deux notions méritent d'être expliquées.

C'est la liberté d'abord qui distingue l'homme des animaux. Par liberté, Rousseau entend la faculté qui nous permet de nous écarter de la règle de la nature :

“ J'aperçois précisément les mêmes choses dans la machine humaine, avec cette différence que la nature

²⁵ Cf. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, Le Livre de Poche, 1996, p. 87

seule fait tout dans les opérations de la bête, au lieu que l’homme concourt aux siennes, en qualité d’agent libre. L’un choisit ou rejette par instinct, et l’autre par un acte de liberté ; ce qui fait que la bête ne peut s’écarter de la règle qui lui est prescrite, même quand il lui serait avantageux de le faire, et que l’homme s’en écarte à son préjudice [...]»²⁶.

Ce passage met en évidence la première différence entre l’homme et la bête : l’homme est guidé par la liberté et la bête, par l’instinct ou la nature. L’identité ou l’essence de l’animal est prédéfinie par la nature ; c’est l’instinct qui le guide, et c’est pour cela justement qu’il ne peut pas « *s’écarter de la règle qui lui est prescrite* » selon Rousseau. Un herbivore reste herbivore jusqu’à la fin de sa vie ; il en est de même pour le carnivore. Le fait de s’écarter de la règle de la nature lui fait mal. Bref, tout est prédéfini par la nature chez l’animal. Il est dépourvu de liberté ; c’est l’instinct qui le guide ; il fait tout par instinct. Toute la vie des animaux est déjà programmée par la nature. C’est pour cela qu’ils n’ont pas besoin d’éducation comme les hommes. A peine sortie de l’œuf, par exemple, la petite tortue de mer sait déjà tout. Elle sait marcher, nager ; elle se débrouille toute seule pour manger. Elle n’a besoin de rien apprendre parce que tout est déjà programmé par la nature. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi pour l’homme en tant qu’être libre. Il n’est pas guidé par l’instinct ou la nature, mais par la liberté. Voilà pourquoi, il doit tout apprendre ; rien ne va de soi pour l’enfant. Contrairement aux animaux, l’enfant a besoin d’être éduqué. En l’absence d’une éducation sérieuse, un enfant peut rester le même jusqu’à la fin de sa vie. Mais l’éducation est impossible sans la liberté. Cette dernière est la première condition de possibilité de l’éducation, la deuxième est la perfectibilité.

Par perfectibilité, Rousseau entend

“ la faculté de se perfectionner ; faculté qui, à l’aide des circonstances, développe successivement toutes les autres, et réside parmi nous tant dans l’espèce que dans l’individu, au lieu qu’un animal est, au bout de quelques mois,

²⁶ Rousseau, *Op Cit*, p.87.

ce qu'il sera toute sa vie, et son espèce, au bout de mille ans,
ce qu'elle était la première année de ces mille ans²⁷.

Cela signifie que l'homme n'est pas comme la bête selon Rousseau. La bête ne peut pas se perfectionner, parce que tout est programmé par la nature pour elle. Elle est déjà tout ce qu'elle peut être, et c'est pour cela justement que les animaux n'ont pas d'histoire. Il n'y a pas d'évolution dans la société animale parce qu'ils ne peuvent pas se perfectionner. Il n'en est pas ainsi pour l'homme ; il est un être perfectible. Grâce à sa perfectibilité, il peut devenir ce qu'il veut être. S'il le veut, l'homme peut devenir meilleur, mais il peut aussi devenir le pire des animaux. Tout est encore possible pour l'homme grâce à sa nature perfectible. C'est cette perfectibilité de l'homme qui rend possible l'éducation. L'homme est ce que l'éducation fait de lui. C'est pour cela que la société humaine est toujours en évolution.

Ce qui frappe dans cette perspective kantienne, c'est la valorisation de l'éducation : c'est comme si l'humanisation de l'enfant dépendait uniquement de l'éducation. Certes l'éducation a un rôle à jouer, mais elle n'est pas l'unique facteur de formation de l'enfant et l'homme adulte mérite aussi un développement éthique, citoyen et peut s'engager dans la production d'œuvre culturelles et spirituelles. L'éthique, en particulier, joue par conséquent aussi une place importante dans le processus d'humanisation de l'homme. Et dans cette perspective, certaines optiques propres à l'*Éthique* de Spinoza (1632-1677) nous paraissent particulièrement intéressantes. D'après ce philosophe, en effet, l'éthique est en quelque sorte un art de vivre ; elle a pour but l'épanouissement de l'homme. Contrairement à la morale kantienne qui insiste sur la nécessité de faire son devoir par devoir, l'éthique spinoziste nous invite à vivre de manière rationnelle pour atteindre la béatitude²⁸. Le contrôle de la raison est nécessaire dans l'éthique, parce que l'homme se laisse souvent guider par les passions et les instincts. L'homme a, en effet, beaucoup de désirs. Spinoza dit même que « *le désir est l'essence de*

²⁷ Rousseau, *Op Cit*, pp.87-88.

²⁸ Cf. Lenoir, *Le miracle Spinoza*, Fayard, 2017, p.184.

l’homme »²⁹. Les désirs et les passions ne sont pas mauvais en soi. Mais lorsqu’ils sont mal orientés, ils peuvent nous éloigner de notre but : la béatitude, la joie. C’est pour cela que l’éthique de Spinoza exige la maîtrise de toutes les passions. Ces dernières ne doivent pas être supprimées ; elles doivent seulement être orientées par la raison. Dans ce sens, l’éthique de Spinoza est rationnelle. Et sur ce point, Frédéric Lenoir a raison de dire que « *l’objectif de l’éthique spinoziste consiste (...) à organiser sa vie grâce à la raison pour diminuer la tristesse et augmenter la joie*³⁰. » Pour atteindre son plein épanouissement, l’homme doit pratiquer les vertus. C’est la pratique des vertus qui nous rend bons pour nous-mêmes et pour les autres. L’homme vertueux s’épanouit personnellement et il est aussi utile dans la société. Soulignons seulement que Spinoza a sa propre définition de la vertu : « *Agir par vertu, ce n’est rien d’autre en nous qu’agir, vivre, conserver son être sous la conduite de la raison*³¹. » Telle est l’exigence de l’éthique spinoziste. D’après ce point de vue, le rôle de l’éducateur consiste selon Spinoza à aider l’enfant à maîtriser ses passions et à se laisser guider par la raison. Son point de vue est différent de celui de Kant en ce qu’il refuse l’idée selon laquelle l’éducation devrait combattre la sensibilité comme une simple animalité ; il invite à ce moment bref où chacun peut devenir le saint ou le héros d’un instant. Ainsi que l’a vu Vladimir Jankélévitch, l’éthique dans la durée et sa notion de perfectibilité, laisse passer au second plan les fulgurances, les étincelles de vertu du devenir évanescent — ces « presque rien » ou « vertus de pointe » —, au profit de celles plus solides au sens d’une éthique du devoir, qui se constitue de « l’intervalle » entre différentes personnes³².

²⁹ Spinoza, *Éthique*. III, p. 469.

³⁰ Lenoir, *Op. Cit.*, p.147.

³¹ Spinoza, *Éthique*, IV,24, p.509.

³² Jankélévitch, V. *Les Vertus et l’amour Traité des vertus II Tome 2*, Paris : Flammarion, 2011.

6. L'éducation en tant que moralisation et humanisation de l'homme

Une chose nous frappe dans la conception kantienne de l'éducation : Kant ne réduit pas l'éducation à une simple instruction. Certainement il y a une place pour l'instruction dans le programme éducatif proposé par Kant³³, mais l'éducation ne se limite pas à l'acquisition du savoir, elle est aussi une moralisation de l'homme. Dans sa conception de l'éducation, en effet, Kant insiste sur l'idée qu'on doit veiller à la moralisation de l'enfant³⁴. D'après lui, éduquer consiste aussi à aider l'enfant à devenir de plus en plus homme. C'est par l'éducation morale, en effet, que l'homme peut devenir pleinement homme. Cela signifie que l'on doit accorder beaucoup d'importance à la morale dans tout programme éducatif. La raison en est que l'homme a une destination morale : « *L'homme est destiné par sa raison (...) à se moraliser ; (...) sa raison le destine (...) à se rendre digne de l'humanité* »³⁵.

D'après ce passage, la nécessité de l'éducation morale est liée à la nature même de l'homme : l'homme est doué de raison, il a sa dignité et ne doit pas vivre comme les animaux. C'est un devoir pour l'être humain que de « se rendre digne de l'humanité » présente dans sa propre personne. Kant admet que l'homme a une double nature : la nature sensible et la nature intelligible. D'un côté, du fait de son appartenance au monde sensible, il vit comme les autres animaux ; il se laisse aussi guider par les instincts, les pulsions et les sentiments etc. C'est le règne de l'animalité³⁶ selon l'expression de Kant. Mais de l'autre côté, l'homme n'est pas un simple animal ; il est doué de raison ; l'humanité est présente dans sa propre personne et c'est pour cela justement que l'homme a une destination morale. La destination morale de l'homme est liée à sa nature raisonnable. Il est doué de raison, il est un sujet moral et doit, par conséquent, respecter son humanité. Respecter l'humanité

³³ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, pp.110-111.

³⁴ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.111.

³⁵ Kant, *Anthropologie*, trad. Michel Foucault, J. Vrin, Paris, 1988, p.164.

³⁶ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, pp.94-95.

signifie concrètement vivre selon la raison et non sous l’emprise des plaisirs sensibles. Nous respectons notre destination morale lorsque nous ne sommes plus esclaves de nos instincts et de nos pulsions. Cela n’est pourtant pas facile, et c’est pour cela que l’homme a besoin de l’éducation. C’est par l’éducation, c’est-à-dire par la discipline, en effet, que nous pouvons transformer l’animalité en humanité.

7. Transformation de l’animalité en humanité par la discipline

L’homme a une destination morale d’après Kant. Il a une nature sensible comme les autres animaux, mais il est aussi doué de raison et doit vivre en tant que sujet moral. Cela signifie que l’homme doit transformer son animalité en humanité. Plus précisément, il ne doit pas se laisser guider par sa nature sensible, mais par la raison. Si l’homme se laisse dominer par ses instincts, ses pulsions et ses inclinations, il risque de rester à l’état sauvage jusqu’à la fin de sa vie³⁷. Mais au nom de sa nature raisonnable, il a besoin de transformer son animalité en humanité, et c’est pour cela qu’il doit être éduqué. L’éducation n’est pas du tout facultative ; c’est une nécessité pour devenir pleinement homme, parce que d’après la perspective kantienne, on ne naît pas homme, on le devient. Kant soutient que l’homme « *vient au monde (...) à l’état brut, il faut que d’autres le fassent pour lui* »³⁸. Le rôle de l’éducation consiste à transformer l’individu brut en être humain. Un problème se pose cependant : comment les éducateurs peuvent remplir cette mission.

Aux yeux de Kant, c’est par la discipline que l’homme peut transformer son animalité en humanité. En l’absence de la discipline, l’homme peut se détourner facilement de sa destination morale : l’humanité³⁹. La discipline ne doit pas être minimisée dans le programme éducatif, et c’est cette valorisation

³⁷ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, pp.96-97.

³⁸ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.94.

³⁹ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.95.

de la discipline justement qui constitue l'originalité de la conception kantienne de l'éducation. Le philosophe de Königsberg est contre ceux qui réduisent l'éducation à une simple instruction. D'après lui, éduquer ne consiste pas seulement à transmettre du savoir, mais aussi à discipliner. Il s'agit d'aider l'enfant à devenir pleinement homme. Cela nécessite une discipline.

Kant ne minimise pas du tout l'importance de l'instruction dans le domaine de l'éducation, il insiste seulement sur l'idée que réduire l'éducation à une simple acquisition du savoir est une erreur. Elle comprend l'instruction et la discipline, mais c'est cette dernière qui prime en matière d'éducation. La discipline joue en effet un rôle important dans l'humanisation de l'individu : « *La discipline soumet l'homme aux lois de l'humanité* »⁴⁰. En fait, une éducation ne doit pas commencer par l'instruction, mais par la discipline. La raison en est que l'humanité de l'homme risque d'être subordonnée à sa nature animale en l'absence de la discipline⁴¹.

La discipline en tant que partie intégrante de la culture morale joue un rôle important dans la moralisation ou l'humanisation de l'homme. Kant pense même que l'homme sans discipline est comme un animal : « *celui qui n'est pas cultivé est brut ; celui qui n'est pas discipliné est sauvage* »⁴². Ce point de vue est vraiment un appel à la valorisation de l'éducation. On ne doit pas minimiser l'éducation car c'est par elle que nous devenons plus homme. Il faut donc que la sauvagerie disparaisse. Pour ce faire, les enfants doivent être disciplinés. La discipline s'apprend dès l'enfance.

Une question vient à l'esprit en parlant de l'importance de la discipline en matière d'éducation : la discipline est-elle compatible avec le principe d'autonomie en morale ? Apparemment la discipline s'oppose à l'autonomie morale, parce qu'elle vient de l'extérieur. Mais aux yeux de Kant, elles ne s'opposent pas du tout. La raison en est que la discipline, en matière d'éducation, n'est pas une fin en soi ; elle n'est qu'un moyen. Le but de la

⁴⁰ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.95.

⁴¹ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, pp.95-96.

⁴² Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.100.

discipline n’est autre que l’autonomie de l’enfant. L’éducateur ne se met pas à la place de l’enfant ; son rôle consiste seulement à le guider ou à l’orienter progressivement vers l’autonomie. L’enfant a besoin des autres pour arriver à maîtriser ses instincts et ses penchants naturels. Autrement il risque de dévier de sa destination morale. D’où, la nécessité de la discipline. En fait, en tant que philosophe des Lumières, Kant poursuit l’idéal d’autonomie dans tous les domaines scientifique, politique et moral. Même dans le domaine de l’éducation, il accorde beaucoup d’importance à l’autonomie de l’enfant, mais cela doit passer par la discipline. Cette dernière est nécessaire pour devenir pleinement homme, mais cela ne suffit pas. La formation du caractère est aussi intéressante.

8. Formation du caractère

La formation du caractère fait partie de l’éducation kantienne. Soulignons cependant que le caractère indique d’abord une attitude que l’enfant doit avoir : « *Le caractère consiste dans la fermeté de la détermination avec laquelle on veut faire quelque chose et aussi dans sa mise à exécution réelle* »⁴³. D’après ce passage, la formation du caractère n’est autre que celle de la personnalité de l’enfant. Par exemple, la fidélité à ses propres valeurs fait partie du caractère moral ; un individu a un caractère moral lorsqu’il défend ses valeurs. Pendant l’enfance, il s’agit donc d’aider l’enfant à avoir toutes les qualités exigées par la morale. Tel est le premier sens du caractère d’après les *Réflexions sur l’éducation*.

Notons cependant que le mot caractère indique aussi une aptitude. C’est la capacité d’agir selon des maximes⁴⁴. Le but consiste à aider l’enfant à avoir une certaine capacité d’agir moralement. Agir moralement ne signifie pas agir par habitude, mais selon des maximes. L’auteur distingue trois maximes : l’obéissance, la véracité et la sociabilité.

⁴³ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.180.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.167.

9. L'obéissance

Comment former le caractère de l'enfant ? Telle est l'une des questions fondamentales auxquelles Kant essaie de répondre en parlant de la formation du caractère. En réponse à cette question, il soutient que l'enfant doit apprendre à obéir aux lois si l'on veut qu'il devienne pleinement homme. Plus précisément, il a besoin d'apprendre à agir par contrainte. Cela signifie concrètement qu'il doit suivre exactement toutes les lois en vigueur. Suivre les lois ne signifie pas se conformer mécaniquement à toutes les règles de la société. Cela veut dire que l'enfant fait siennes toutes les règles, il les suit consciemment et les intériorise. Plus précisément, l'obéissance est déjà une sorte d'intégration sociale pour l'enfant. Il ne doit pas se contenter de se conformer extérieurement aux règles établies, il doit déjà se sentir membre de la société. Aux yeux de Kant, en effet, la simple conformité extérieure aux règles est la légalité. Or, l'éducation qu'il propose n'est pas fondée sur la légalité, mais sur la moralité. Ce qui est légal n'est pas nécessairement moral. La moralité et la légalité sont deux choses différentes d'après lui⁴⁵. C'est pour cela que la simple conformité à la règle ne suffit pas en matière d'éducation d'après Kant. Dans ce sens, le philosophe de Königsberg anticipe déjà, sous certains aspects, la distinction que Wittgenstein établira entre *suivre une règle* et *se conformer à une règle*. L'obéissance dont il parle dans le domaine de l'éducation ne se réduit pas à un simple légalisme. Elle est importante et doit commencer dès l'enfance et par les petites choses⁴⁶.

Ce qui importe dans la formation du caractère, c'est que les enfants ne peuvent pas faire ce qu'ils veulent. Ils font seulement ce que les éducateurs disent et ils doivent le faire par contrainte. Ils ont besoin de se soumettre aux éducateurs et doivent aussi respecter les lois en vigueur. Les lois dont on parle ici sont des lois universelles valables pour tout le monde. Dans le domaine de l'éducation, en effet, Kant ne parle que des lois universelles aux enfants et leur application est aussi pour tous :

⁴⁵ Cf. Kant, *Métaphysique des mœurs : doctrine de la vertu*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.168.

“ Les enfants doivent par conséquent être soumis à une certaine loi de nécessité. Mais cette loi doit être une loi universelle et l’on doit prêter attention à ce point surtout dans les écoles. Le maître ne doit montrer aucune prédilection, aucune préférence pour un enfant parmi les autres. Car sinon la loi cesse d’être universelle »⁴⁷.

En fait, en parlant de l’obéissance aux lois dans la formation du caractère, Kant parle vraiment d’une préparation à la morale universelle. Plus précisément, l’éducation des enfants reflète déjà la dimension universelle de la morale. La morale kantienne est une morale personnelle ayant une dimension universelle. D’un côté, elle est personnelle d’abord en ce sens que chacun est autonome dans la détermination du bien à faire et du mal à éviter ; il n’a besoin de qui que ce soit pour savoir ce qu’il doit faire. Nous connaissons notre devoir et c’est à nous de le définir. Kant considère « *l’autonomie de la volonté comme principe suprême de la moralité* »⁴⁸. Mais de l’autre, sa morale a aussi une dimension universelle en ce sens que nous devons agir seulement en fonction des maximes qui peuvent être érigées en lois universelles⁴⁹. Le philosophe de Königsberg propose une morale valable pour toute l’humanité, et c’est pour cette raison qu’il parle déjà de l’importance de la soumission aux lois universelles à l’école. Obéissance, contrainte et lois : ces trois mots jouent un rôle important dans la formation du caractère de l’enfant.

Une éducation morale authentique doit valoriser l’obéissance et la contrainte : « *l’éducation doit comprendre la contrainte* »⁵⁰. Kant dit même que « *l’école est une culture par contrainte* »⁵¹. L’école est l’endroit favorable où l’enfant commence à obéir aux autres. Une école qui néglige la soumission des enfants à la discipline risque de perdre sa raison d’être. Les enfants ont besoin

⁴⁷ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.169.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, p.169.

⁴⁹ Cf. Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, p.136.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.149.

⁵¹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.149.

d'apprendre à obéir aux maîtres. Même s'ils ne comprennent pas encore les motifs pour lesquels ils doivent obéir, l'important c'est qu'ils font preuve de soumission et d'obéissance. L'obéissance passive dont on parle à l'école est, en effet, une préparation à l'obéissance morale. Les enfants apprennent d'abord à obéir aux maîtres, puis ils finiront par obéir à eux-mêmes après. Plus précisément, la contrainte s'intériorise petit à petit, et l'obéissance passive devient obéissance morale. On parle d'une obéissance morale lorsque l'enfant est capable d'obéir à ses propres lois. Il faut en effet que l'enfant ait une certaine autonomie morale. L'obéissance et la contrainte que l'on doit cultiver à l'école sont en vue de l'autonomie morale de l'enfant. La morale kantienne est, en effet, une morale de l'autonomie. Il y a moralité lorsque l'individu se donne à lui-même ses propres lois. Ce n'est ni à l'autre ni à Dieu de déterminer le bien à faire et le mal à éviter, mais à chacun de nous. Sur le plan moral, l'individu n'a besoin de qui que ce soit pour connaître son devoir, il est autonome. L'autonomie est une exigence de la moralité, et c'est pour cela justement que l'éducation morale des enfants ne doit pas être confiée aux pasteurs selon Kant⁵². D'après lui, en effet, lorsque Dieu intervient dans la détermination de nos devoirs, ce n'est plus le bien en tant que tel qui nous pousse à le faire, mais la crainte de Dieu. De même, d'après l'éducation morale proposée par les religions en général, si nous ne faisons pas le mal, c'est parce que Dieu l'a défendu ; c'est un commandement de Dieu. Plus précisément, le mal en lui-même n'est pas haïssable pour les croyants, il l'est parce que Dieu l'a défendu. Et c'est pour cette raison que les pasteurs ne devraient pas s'occuper de l'éducation morale des enfants selon Kant. D'après lui, que Dieu existe ou qu'Il n'existe pas, le mal en lui-même est haïssable, et l'enfant doit le savoir. Autrement on tombe facilement dans l'hétéronomie de la volonté. Ce qui manque dans l'éducation morale proposée par les pasteurs, c'est que le bien et le mal ne peuvent pas être séparés de Dieu. Le bien est ce qu'Il permet, le mal est ce qu'Il défend. Donc, si Dieu n'existe pas, le bien et le mal disparaîtront avec Lui et la morale n'existerait pas non plus. C'est pour cela que l'enfant doit avoir une certaine autonomie en morale. Cette autonomie se traduit par sa capacité d'obéir à ses

⁵² Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.112.

propres lois : il se soumet aux lois qu’il a lui-même adoptées. Telle est le sens de ce que notre auteur appelle obéissance morale. Il ne s’agit plus d’une simple soumission à la discipline imposée par les éducateurs, mais plutôt d’une obéissance volontaire et intériorisée. L’enfant doit passer de l’obéissance passive à l’obéissance volontaire. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi pour l’adolescent.

Il doit toujours y avoir une place pour l’obéissance dans l’éducation selon Kant, mais elle change seulement de forme au fur et à mesure que l’enfant croît. Pour les adolescents, par exemple, on ne parle plus d’une simple obéissance aux parents comme celle des enfants. Pour eux, l’obéissance est plutôt une « *soumission aux règles du devoir. Faire quelque chose par devoir signifie obéir à la raison* »⁵³. Faire son devoir selon Kant, c’est obéir à la raison, parce que le devoir dérive de la raison. Les adolescents ont déjà besoin d’apprendre à agir par devoir, car la morale kantienne est une morale du devoir. D’après lui, le devoir n’est autre que « *la nécessité d’accomplir une action par respect pour la loi* »⁵⁴. Le respect pour la loi est le seul principe déterminant de la volonté dans une action morale. Une action est dite morale lorsque la volonté du sujet est déterminée par le devoir et le devoir uniquement. Bref agir moralement, c’est agir par devoir.

Il importe cependant de souligner que selon la perspective kantienne, il ne suffit pas de faire son devoir, il faut faire son devoir par devoir. Et c’est cela qui constitue en quelque sorte l’originalité de la conception de Kant. Il fait la distinction entre l’acte conforme au devoir et l’acte fait par devoir, c’est-à-dire entre la légalité et la moralité. Ce qui est légal n’est pas nécessairement moral. Nous avons tendance à réduire la moralité à la simple légalité. Mais l’auteur des trois *Critiques* ne partage pas ce point de vue. Une action extérieurement conforme au devoir n’a pas nécessairement un mérite moral. On ne peut pas juger la moralité d’une action en fonction de sa simple conformité au devoir. La moralité dépasse la légalité ; il ne suffit pas de faire son devoir, on doit aussi le faire par devoir. C’est dans le fait d’agir par devoir,

⁵³ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.173.

⁵⁴ Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, p.100.

c'est-à-dire par respect, que réside la moralité. L'adolescent a besoin de comprendre tout cela, et les éducateurs doivent en parler à l'école. Une éducation morale digne de ce nom doit cultiver chez les jeunes le sens du devoir.

10. La véracité

La deuxième chose que l'on ne peut pas oublier en parlant de la formation du caractère de l'enfant est la véracité. La véracité est en effet une exigence de la moralité. Elle désigne le devoir de dire la vérité non seulement envers autrui, mais aussi envers soi-même. Si l'on veut que l'enfant soit capable d'agir moralement, les éducateurs ou les parents doivent l'aider à être en accord avec lui-même. L'enfant doit savoir qu'il n'est pas un simple animal mais un être humain ; telle est sa nature, donc il doit vivre en accord avec sa nature en disant toujours la vérité. Dire la vérité est un devoir, parce que le mensonge abaisse l'homme au-dessous de l'animal⁵⁵.

Dans le domaine de l'éducation, Kant accorde beaucoup d'importance à la véracité, car sa morale repose sur le devoir. D'après lui, dire la vérité est un devoir, c'est-à-dire un impératif moral. Au nom de la rigueur morale, on doit dire la vérité et le mensonge est formellement interdit en toutes circonstances. Éduquer les enfants selon ce principe n'est pas toujours facile, parce que dans certaines situations, le mensonge peut être préférable à la vérité. Les médecins savent bien, par exemple, que dans certains cas, mieux vaut mentir que dire la vérité. C'est pour cela aussi que Hannah Arendt critique vivement les morales du devoir, plus particulièrement celle de Kant. Dans ses livres *Juger. Sur la philosophie politique de Kant* (1982) et *La vie de l'esprit* (1977-1978), elle soutient que l'obstination dans le devoir est parfois dangereuse. La morale du devoir nous oblige, en effet, à dire toujours la vérité quelles qu'en soient les conséquences. Nous savons cependant que le fait de dire la vérité peut aussi nous conduire à l'irresponsabilité. Le problème de la morale du devoir est qu'elle reste seulement dans l'abstraction sans tenir compte des circonstances. Nous savons cependant que dans le domaine de l'éducation,

⁵⁵ Cf Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.183.

l’enfant a aussi besoin d’apprendre à concilier les règles générales et les situations particulières. Dans cette perspective, la morale de Schopenhauer présente un intérêt particulier en matière d’éducation. Contrairement à Kant, en effet, ce philosophe soutient que la vérité n’est pas toujours la meilleure conseillère dans la vie. Rappelons d’abord que Schopenhauer ne fonde pas la morale sur le devoir, mais sur la compassion. Dans son ouvrage le *Fondement de la morale* (1840), il ne minimise pas du tout l’importance de la véracité. Il ne considère pas non plus le mensonge comme un principe moral. Il dit cependant que le mensonge peut parfois être toléré lorsqu’il est motivé par la compassion pour éviter ou soulager la souffrance d’autrui. Contrairement à Kant qui considère la véracité comme un devoir inconditionnel, Schopenhauer estime que le mensonge n’est pas nécessairement immoral. Il est plus souple dans sa conception du mensonge. Il adopte une position plus simple que Kant à l’égard du mensonge. L’éthique de la compassion développée par Schopenhauer peut contribuer à atténuer la rigidité de l’éducation kantienne.

Quoi qu’il en soit, Kant soutient que la véracité joue un rôle important dans la formation du caractère de l’enfant. Elle est le contraire du mensonge ; « *un homme qui ment ne possède pas de caractère* »⁵⁶. Il ne respecte pas non plus la dignité de l’humanité en lui. Par le mensonge, l’homme a moins de valeur qu’un animal. La véracité est quelque chose de sacré aux yeux de Kant, et c’est pour cela justement qu’il insiste sur son importance dans l’éducation morale des enfants. D’après cela, le rôle de l’éducateur consiste à aider l’enfant à haïr le mensonge et à aimer la vérité. En effet, mentir, c’est être en désaccord avec soi-même, et celui qui ment ne respecte pas sa propre dignité et celle des autres. Kant pense en effet que le mensonge est une négation de la dignité humaine⁵⁷ et l’enfant doit le savoir.

Kant accorde beaucoup d’importance à la véracité. Il soutient l’idée que l’on ne peut pas la minimiser dans le domaine de l’éducation. Une éducation morale digne de ce nom doit aider l’enfant à s’éloigner du mensonge.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.173.

⁵⁷ Cf. Kant, *Métaphysique des mœurs : doctrine de la vertu*, pp.103-104.

La véracité et la dignité de l'humanité sont intimement liées d'après lui. Celui qui n'est pas véridique aime le mensonge ; le non-respect de la dignité se manifeste par le mensonge. Le menteur n'est pas en accord avec lui-même ; le mensonge n'est pas seulement une rupture intérieure, mais il est aussi une trahison de la loi morale. Le respect de la dignité humaine est, en effet, une exigence de la moralité⁵⁸.

Le mensonge est une violation de la loi morale parce que d'un côté, celui qui ment n'est pas cohérent avec lui-même, et de l'autre, il traite les autres comme des moyens. Plus précisément, le menteur commet une double faute : il ne respecte ni sa propre dignité ni celle des autres. La valorisation de la véracité dans le système éducatif est un moyen efficace pour éviter tout cela. L'enfant a besoin d'apprendre à respecter l'humanité aussi bien dans sa personne que dans celle d'autrui. Le respect de l'humanité se traduit par l'amour de la véracité, ennemie du mensonge. Par le mensonge, en effet, l'homme peut commettre beaucoup d'actes de barbarie ; il peut même devenir le pire des animaux. « *Selon l'Écriture, le mal est entré dans le monde non par le crime, mais par le mensonge* »⁵⁹, dit Alexis Philonenko en commentant la philosophie kantienne de l'éducation. Une éducation morale sérieuse se caractérise par l'amour de la véracité. La dignité humaine sera bafouée tant que nous vivons dans le mensonge. L'enfant doit s'éloigner du mensonge en vivant toujours en accord avec sa nature humaine. C'est en agissant ainsi qu'il peut devenir de plus en plus homme. L'enfant ne peut pourtant pas le réaliser tout seul, l'accompagnement de l'éducateur est toujours utile.

Outre le mensonge, l'obéissance aux inclinations sensibles abaisse l'homme au-dessous de l'animal. Plus précisément, celui qui se laisse dominer par les instincts, les désirs et toutes les inclinations sensibles ne respecte pas sa propre dignité⁶⁰. Le respect de la dignité de l'humanité exige la maîtrise de la nature sensible. Celui qui est encore esclave de ses instincts et de ses inclinations sensibles perd sa dignité. Les animaux sont guidés par la nature sensible, mais

⁵⁸ Cf. Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, p.150.

⁵⁹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p. 83.

⁶⁰ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, pp.182-183.

l’homme vit selon les principes de la raison. L’enfant doit passer de l’animalité à l’humanité ; l’éducation est donc nécessaire. Comme Kant lui-même le dit en effet, « *l’homme ne peut devenir homme que par l’éducation. Il n’est que ce que l’éducation fait de lui* »⁶¹. Le rôle de l’éducateur consiste à aider l’enfant à discipliner ses inclinations sensibles pour qu’elles ne portent pas atteinte à la dignité humaine. Le philosophe de Königsberg ne nous demande pas de supprimer les désirs et les pulsions, il nous demande tout simplement de les subordonner aux lois morales venant de la raison. D’après lui, l’important est que les enfants ont déjà une certaine maîtrise de leur nature sensible. Ils ne doivent pas se laisser dominer par les penchants biologiques. C’est la raison qui doit les guider. C’est la vie selon la raison qui correspond à la dignité humaine. Les instincts et les désirs nous rapprochent de l’animal et doivent être maîtrisés. Il en est de même pour tous les sentiments, ils sont sensibles et doivent se subordonner aux lois morales de la raison : « *l’enfant ne doit pas être plein de sentiment, mais pénétré par l’idée du devoir* »⁶². A vrai dire, c’est l’obéissance aux lois de la raison qui prime par rapport aux sentiments dans l’éducation morale des enfants. La formation du caractère a pour but d’aider les enfants à se déterminer en fonction des principes rationnels uniquement. S’ils sont capables de se déterminer indépendamment des mobiles sensibles, on peut dire qu’ils ont déjà le caractère moral. Cela n’est cependant qu’une exigence de l’éducation morale. Les enfants doivent aussi apprendre à vivre avec les autres. D’où, la nécessité de la sociabilité.

11. La sociabilité

Après la véracité, la sociabilité est le troisième caractère que l’enfant doit avoir selon Kant⁶³ : l’enfant doit être sociable ; il a besoin d’apprendre à vivre avec les autres, parce que la sociabilité est une condition essentielle de l’éducation morale. Cela signifie que le but de l’éducation n’est pas seulement le développement personnel de l’enfant. Certes le développement personnel

⁶¹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.98.

⁶² Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.186

⁶³ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.174

est important et l'auteur ne le minimise pas du tout. Mais il soutient aussi que l'éducation doit avoir une dimension sociale. La raison en est que la communauté humaine doit se préparer à l'école. L'avenir de la société dépend essentiellement de l'école. Telle est la conviction de l'auteur d'après les *Réflexions sur l'éducation*. Voilà pourquoi il ne se contente pas de former des individus capables d'avoir une certaine autonomie morale, il prépare aussi de bons citoyens capables de participer activement à la vie du groupe. C'est la sociabilité qui nous permet de le réaliser selon Kant. Il convient donc de partir de ce qu'il entend au juste par sociabilité.

Rappelons d'abord que Kant ne nous donne pas une définition précise de la sociabilité dans les *Réflexions sur l'éducation*. Ce passage nous permet cependant de mieux comprendre la signification de ce mot :

“ un troisième trait dans le caractère d'un enfant doit être la sociabilité. Il doit entretenir aussi avec d'autres des rapports d'amitié et ne pas exister toujours seulement pour lui-même⁶⁴.

D'après cela, nous pouvons dire que la sociabilité est en quelque sorte la capacité de vivre avec les autres dans une telle ou telle société. Un enfant est sociable lorsqu'il vit harmonieusement avec les autres en respectant les lois communes. Comme Kant le dit, en effet, l'enfant n'existe pas seulement pour lui-même⁶⁵ ; il existe aussi pour les autres. Pour devenir pleinement homme, il a besoin de tisser des relations avec les membres de la société. La sociabilité est, en effet, une disposition qui doit être cultivée pendant l'enfance. Kant insiste sur la nécessité de cultiver la sensibilité parce qu'elle procure la joie dont nous avons besoin dans l'accomplissement de nos devoirs : « *un cœur joyeux est seul capable de sentir une satisfaction à faire le bien* »⁶⁶. Un homme triste et malheureux ne peut pas remplir correctement son devoir. La pratique de la morale suppose la joie et les plaisirs. Et c'est pour cela

⁶⁴ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.174.

⁶⁵ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.174.

⁶⁶ Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.175.

justement que la sociabilité doit être cultivée dès l’enfance. Les éducateurs doivent promouvoir tout ce qui favorise la joie. Kant le dit clairement :

“ Les enfants doivent se préparer à la plus douce jouissance de la vie (...). Ils doivent aussi être candides et leurs regards doivent être aussi sereins que le soleil⁶⁷.

La raison en est que la joie est une condition essentielle de l’éducation morale. L’éducation kantienne est ouverte à la joie ; la valorisation de la sociabilité en est une preuve.

Certes, l’intégration de l’enfant dans la société n’est pas du tout facile. L’auteur lui-même se rend compte de cette difficulté et parle d’une « insociable sociabilité » dans l’*Idée d’une histoire universelle du point de vue cosmopolitique* (1784). D’après lui, en effet, la sociabilité n’indique pas seulement l’aptitude à vivre avec les autres, elle signifie aussi être soucieux des droits des autres. L’enfant doit éviter l’égoïsme, parce qu’il n’existe pas seulement pour lui-même⁶⁸, mais aussi pour les autres. Il doit donc respecter les autres. Contrairement à ce que l’on pense habituellement, en effet, la sociabilité n’est pas un simple apprentissage de la politesse, elle indique et exige la soumission aux lois morales universelles. Le rôle de l’éducateur consiste à aider l’enfant à se déterminer uniquement selon des maximes universalisables. Il s’agit là en effet d’une exigence de la moralité : « *Agis uniquement d’après la maxime qui fait que tu peux vouloir en même temps qu’elle devienne une loi universelle* »⁶⁹. Cela signifie qu’agir moralement n’est pas du tout facile d’après la perspective kantienne. Avant d’agir, le sujet doit d’abord se demander si la maxime de son action peut être érigée en loi universelle. Plus précisément, toute maxime doit passer par l’épreuve ou le test d’universalisation. Si la maxime peut être érigée en loi universelle, c’est-à-dire si elle est valable pour tous les hommes, le sujet peut agir et son action a un mérite moral. Cela signifie qu’il n’y a plus de place pour la recherche d’intérêts égoïstes dans la morale de Kant. Celui-ci soutient cependant que

⁶⁷ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, pp.174-175.

⁶⁸ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.174.

⁶⁹ Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, p.136.

l'enfant a besoin d'apprendre à agir ainsi. On laisse tomber les intérêts égoïstes et on se soucie des droits d'autrui. Cela n'est pas du tout facile parce que l'homme est naturellement porté vers l'égoïsme. Mais que l'éducation à la sociabilité soit difficile ou qu'elle ne le soit pas, l'éducateur doit aider l'enfant à sortir de lui-même et à se soucier des autres. Certes cela est difficile, mais il faut le faire. Autrement l'enfant risque de se comporter comme des animaux. Kant lui-même soutient que par nature, l'homme n'est ni bon ni mauvais moralement, il le devient par l'éducation⁷⁰. L'éducation ne doit donc pas être minimisée ; la sociabilité est une condition *sine qua non* de l'éducation. L'auteur de la *Critique* valorise l'éducation parce que la société se prépare déjà à l'école.

12. Conclusion

L'éducation est l'une des préoccupations de Kant. Elle a des fondements philosophiques qui peuvent l'ancrer dans un concept de durabilité ; elle est en quelque sorte le passage de l'être au devoir être. Éduquer consiste à aider l'enfant à passer de son animalité à l'humanité. L'enfant doit sortir de l'état sauvage pour devenir pleinement homme. Il s'agit là d'une nécessité parce que l'homme vient au monde à l'état brut alors qu'il a une destination morale. Et c'est pour cette raison justement que l'homme a besoin de l'éducation. C'est l'éducation qui permet à l'homme de passer de son animalité à l'humanité. Plus précisément, c'est par l'éducation que l'homme peut devenir pleinement homme. L'éducation est en effet une moralisation ou une humanisation de l'homme. Éduquer signifie aider quelqu'un à devenir acteur de sa propre formation et à mener une vie vertueuse. La vie vertueuse est nécessaire, parce que l'éducation comporte toujours des valeurs à vivre.

L'éducation joue un rôle important dans la vie de l'homme. Un enfant sans éducation est sauvage ; il n'est qu'un animal comme les autres. Aux yeux de Kant, en effet, on ne naît pas homme, on le devient par l'éducation. « *L'homme ne peut devenir homme que par l'éducation. Il n'est que ce que*

⁷⁰ Cf. Kant, *Réflexions sur l'éducation*, p.189.

*l’éducation fait de lui*⁷¹. » C’est pour cela que Kant accorde beaucoup d’importance à l’éducation ; sa philosophie se caractérise par la valorisation de cette dernière. Il soutient en effet que l’éducation vise non seulement le développement personnel de l’individu, mais aussi l’harmonie sociale et la paix dans le monde. Il a la ferme conviction que tout commence à l’école. L’avenir de la société et celui du monde entier dépendent de notre système éducatif. Kant partage l’idée selon laquelle « *si vous voulez détruire un pays (...), il suffit de détruire son système d’éducation* ». Tout dépend de ce qui se fait à l’école ; ses réflexions mettent en valeur le rôle essentiel et durable de l’éducation dans la formation de l’humanité. Nous pensons que cette conception kantienne de l’éducation peut nous aider à construire un monde meilleur et à l’ancrer dans un cadre de valeurs pérennes.

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⁷¹ Kant, *Réflexions sur l’éducation*, p.98.

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