

Balancing Innovation and Integrity: A Systematic Review of AI's Role in the Commodification of Academic Success under Capitalist Pressures in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

This systematic review critically examines the dual role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education within the marginalized, post-apartheid context of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It investigates the tension between AI's innovative potential and its function in the capitalist commodification of academic success. The study contributes a vital Southern perspective by applying an integrated critical-decolonial framework—synthesizing Freirean pedagogy and decolonial theory—to interrogate how local socio-economic pressures and embedded algorithmic biases perpetuate digital exclusion, epistemic injustice, and the erosion of academic integrity. A systematic literature review, conducted according to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, synthesised 48 qualitative and mixed-methods studies (2014–2024) from academic databases and grey literature. The analysis reveals three core, interconnected tensions. First, AI acts as both an enabler and excluder; its benefits are unevenly distributed, deepening the digital divide for students in under-resourced rural and township institutions. Second, commodification is driven by survivalist pragmatism, where financial precarity and familial obligations (*ubuntu*) fuel a credentialist approach, leading students to co-opt AI tools to optimise grades at the expense of deep, critical learning. Third, algorithmic bias functions as a form of digital coloniality, where AI career guidance platforms built on Western data systematically marginalize Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), steering students away from locally relevant pathways. The review concludes that unchecked AI adoption risks exacerbating historical inequalities. It advocates for context-sensitive interventions to harness AI for educational justice, including co-designed critical AI literacy programs, mandatory algorithmic audits for local bias, bridging the digital divide through infrastructure equity, and reforming career guidance to centre IKS and provincial needs.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Academic Integrity, Commodification, Decoloniality, Epistemic Injustice, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, KwaZulu-Natal