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ESSAY

Inequality and Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education

Desigualdad e Inteligencia Artificial en la Educación Superior

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education is presented as a promise of academic transformation associated with the democratization of access to information, the personalization of learning, and the expansion of educational opportunities; however, its incorporation raises epistemic, pedagogical, and social tensions that require critical analysis. This essay aims to examine the implications of artificial intelligence for knowledge construction, the configuration of academic subjectivity, and the reproduction of educational inequalities in university contexts. The study follows the inductive method within the humanistic paradigm, with a qualitative, interpretive approach and a narrative-topical design. The analysis is based on a critical review of recent scientific and academic literature, organized into four axes: the actual scope of artificial intelligence applications in higher education, the epistemic dimension of algorithmic knowledge, data-mediated student subjectivity, and educational inequality associated with the digital divide. The essay argues that artificial intelligence does not operate as a neutral agent or as an inherently democratizing technology, but rather as a sociotechnical system capable of amplifying institutional rationalities, algorithmic biases, and pre-existing inequalities. It concludes that its integration into universities should be guided by criteria of epistemic justice, cognitive autonomy, critical digital literacy, and pedagogical responsibility to prevent algorithmic efficiency from displacing students' reflective formation.

KEYWORDS: Artificial intelligence, higher education, educational inequality, digital divide, epistemic justice.

RESUMEN

La inteligencia artificial (IA) en la educación superior se presentó como una promesa de transformación académica asociada con la democratización del acceso a la información, la personalización del aprendizaje y la ampliación de las oportunidades formativas; sin embargo, su incorporación planteó tensiones epistémicas, pedagógicas y sociales que exigieron un análisis crítico. El objetivo del ensayo fue examinar las implicaciones de la inteligencia artificial en la construcción del conocimiento, la configuración de la subjetividad académica y la reproducción de las desigualdades educativas en contextos universitarios. El estudio se enmarcó en el método inductivo, bajo el paradigma humanista, con enfoque cualitativo, de tipo interpretativo y con diseño narrativo-tópico. El análisis se desarrolló mediante una revisión crítica de la literatura científica y académica reciente, organizada en cuatro ejes: campo real de aplicación de la IA en educación superior, dimensión epistémica del conocimiento algorítmico, subjetividad estudiantil mediada por datos y desigualdad educativa asociada a la brecha digital. El ensayo sostuvo que la IA no actuó como agente neutral ni como tecnología inherentemente democratizadora, sino como un sistema sociotécnico capaz de amplificar racionalidades institucionales, sesgos algorítmicos y desigualdades preexistentes. Se concluyó que su integración universitaria debía orientarse por criterios de justicia epistémica, autonomía cognitiva, alfabetización digital crítica y responsabilidad pedagógica, a fin de evitar que la eficiencia algorítmica desplazara la formación reflexiva del estudiante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Inteligencia artificial, educación superior, desigualdad educativa, brecha digital, justicia epistémica.

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is presented in higher education as a contemporary promise of academic transformation, associated with democratizing access to information, personalizing learning, and expanding educational opportunities. However, its incorporation cannot be understood solely from an instrumental perspective, as it intervenes in the production, validation, and circulation of knowledge within universities. This essay aims to examine the implications of AI for knowledge construction and the configuration of academic subjectivity by questioning relations of intellectual authority, standards of rigor, and conditions of professional education in ecosystems mediated by algorithmic data.

The debate on AI in higher education has largely been shaped by a social imaginary of disruptive innovation and technological determinism, according to which algorithmic systems could autonomously optimize educational and institutional processes. Yet this interpretation is insufficient because it overlooks the fact that AI does not operate as a neutral agent and cannot independently correct structural inequalities of social, economic, educational, and institutional origin. In this regard, Pireci Sejdiu & Sejdiu (2025) and Zuboff (2020) warn that algorithmic technologies must be examined within frameworks of power, governance, surveillance, and institutional rationality, since their effects depend on the social conditions under which they are designed, implemented, and appropriated.

From this perspective, the emancipatory promise of AI calls for an epistemological examination that moves beyond uncritical confidence in technical efficiency. Recent literature shows that many AI applications in higher education are directed toward operational goals, administrative metrics, predictive analyses of student retention, and reductions in bureaucratic management costs (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu, 2023; Bates et al., 2020; Sousa, 2025). This orientation shifts the debate from students' critical education toward institutional optimization, creating tensions among algorithmic efficiency, epistemic justice, and cognitive autonomy. Consequently, unequal educational trajectories require critical examination of free AI tools, algorithmic hallucinations, the generation of nonexistent sources, and instrumental dependence. According to Binns (2023), these technologies reconfigure cognitive practices and may deepen gaps in cultural capital, data surveillance, evaluation biases, and new forms of exclusion (Flores-Vivar & García-Peñalvo, 2023).

This essay follows the inductive method, oriented toward the critical analysis of an observed phenomenon through the interpretation of its manifestations in higher education. It is grounded in the humanistic paradigm, adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, and employs a narrative-topical design, as it problematizes the relationship among AI, educational inequality, knowledge construction, and academic subjectivity. The analysis is based on a critical review of recent scientific and academic literature, emphasizing studies on AI in education, the digital divide, algorithmic governance, cognitive autonomy, and epistemic justice. On this basis, the essay delineates four areas of reflection: the actual scope of AI applications in higher education, the epistemic dimension of algorithmic knowledge, data-mediated student subjectivity, and inequalities associated with access to, use of, and critical validation of these technologies.

Discussion

The discussion is organized around four argumentative dimensions that enable an examination of AI in higher education beyond its instrumental aspects. First, it analyzes the actual scope of AI applications and their limitations in relation to the promise of educational transformation. Second, it critically examines the epistemic dimension of algorithmic knowledge, particularly with regard to authority, academic validation, and students' cognitive autonomy. Third, it addresses the configuration of algorithmic subjectivity as an effect of the datafication of learning. Finally, it examines educational inequality and the digital divide as structural conditions that determine differentiated forms of access, use, and critical appropriation of these technologies.

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The Actual Scope of AI in Higher Education

Discourse on AI in higher education has largely been constructed through a functional analogy with other sectors in which algorithmic systems have optimized management, prediction, and decision-making processes, such as health care, finance, and logistics (García-Hormazábal, 2025). However, transferring this logic of efficiency to universities entails assuming equivalence between domains with distinct epistemological natures. Higher education cannot be understood as a closed system of operational productivity, because it constitutes a normative, relational, and hermeneutic field in which learning involves interpretation, critical judgment, ethical deliberation, and situated construction of meaning (Labraña & Brunner, 2022; Martínez-Márquez, 2025).

Specialized literature cautions that incorporating AI into higher education does not guarantee a linear transfer of benefits across sectors or automatic pedagogical transformation. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) identify four principal areas of application: profiling and prediction, intelligent tutoring systems, automated assessment, feedback, and adaptive learning. These developments represent important technical advances, but their impact on higher-order learning, such as critical reasoning, complex argumentation, or ethical deliberation, remains limited and methodologically debatable. This tension suggests that technical effectiveness does not necessarily translate into educational depth.

A second tension concerns the disciplinary bias that has marked part of the scientific literature on educational AI. Bates et al. (2020) warned that many studies privilege quantifiable variables associated with computer science, such as pass rates, dropout rates, performance on standardized tests, and prediction of academic trajectories. Consequently, educational dimensions of greater qualitative complexity, including critical reflection, intellectual autonomy, ethical deliberation, and argumentative construction, remain subordinate or insufficiently examined within algorithmic evaluation models.

This methodological shift is not a neutral process but responds to a knowledge economy in which data acquire normative authority in university management. Evaluation systems tend to privilege what can be measured, compared, and processed through automation. García Arranz (2025) argues that epistemic subordination to measurable data may become the dominant logic of institutional performance. Consequently, questions concerning the educational meaning of learning lose prominence in favor of indicators of efficiency, productivity, and organizational performance, thereby redefining educational priorities according to predominantly instrumental criteria.

The implementation of AI in higher education cannot be analyzed independently of the organizational conditions in which it is integrated. Universities operate under pressures related to accreditation, rankings, funding, and student retention; accordingly, the promise of personalization may become a sophisticated form of predictive administration. In this context, AI is often directed toward identifying at-risk students, anticipating dropout, and optimizing institutional interventions. According to González et al. (2021), educational digitalization is not limited to introducing technical tools but reconfigures institutional rationality by replacing profound pedagogical questions with questions centered on efficiency, measurement, and the reduction of operational friction.

Within the actual scope of AI in higher education, a tension thus emerges between technical potential and structural limitations. Algorithmic hallucinations, training biases, and dependence on predictive models are particularly problematic for socioeconomically vulnerable students. García-Peñalvo et al. (2024) and Noble (2018) warn that systems trained on asymmetric data may reproduce existing biases. Accordingly, Farrelly & Baker (2023) challenge the assumption that AI automatically democratizes education and propose situated assessments that distinguish operational efficiency from epistemic justice. The central question is not whether AI can optimize administrative processes, but whether it can expand educational horizons without reducing learning to computable patterns. According to Chiappe et al. (2025), without rigorous ethical and epistemological deliberation, algorithmic innovation risks becoming an intensified managerial rationality rather than substantive educational transformation.

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Epistemic Dimension: Does AI Produce Knowledge?

The epistemic debate on AI in higher education should not be restricted to instrumental usefulness, since the central issue concerns the regime of knowledge production, validation, and circulation that emerges when algorithmic mediation intervenes in reading, writing, assessment, and academic inquiry. For Zuboff & Schwandt (2019), surveillance capitalism transforms data into inputs for prediction and control, requiring an examination of the conditions under which technology acquires cognitive authority. Along these lines, Huh (2023) acknowledges that generative AI produces syntactically coherent and rhetorically plausible texts; however, Kaliterna et al. (2024) caution that such plausibility is not equivalent to truth, substantiation, or argumentative consistency.

Epistemic validation of knowledge in digital environments requires distinguishing access to information, academic authority, and the critical production of meaning. Guleria et al. (2023) and Byung-Chul (2022) maintain that it is necessary to examine how certain sources, discourses, and automated responses acquire legitimacy in settings characterized by the speed of information, algorithmic biases, and the apparent democratization of knowledge. Where methodological training is uneven, AI may become a substitute cognitive authority, not only because of the risk of plagiarism but also through the progressive outsourcing of central intellectual operations, such as formulating questions, contrasting evidence, constructing arguments, and identifying uncertainty (Rivera-Novoa, 2025; Cruz-Avalos et al., 2025).

The uncritical transfer of cognitive operations to algorithmic systems may weaken professional education when students replace reflective processes with automated responses. This situation revives, in technological terms, Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education, in which individuals receive content without actively participating in its construction. Knowledge automation may intensify that passivity when students privilege algorithmic summaries of large corpora and displace teacher mediation, critical reading, and the development of their own voice (Selwyn, 2024; Salas & Berbel Tello, 2023). From the standpoint of social epistemology, Haraway (1988) argued that all knowledge is situated and that claims of universal neutrality conceal relations of power. This warning is relevant to understanding that AI models are trained on data shaped by linguistic, geopolitical, and disciplinary hegemonies.

From the theory of situated knowledge, algorithmic systems may reproduce structural biases embedded in their training data. Bender et al. (2021) and Lo (2023) caution that language models tend to privilege particular conceptual frameworks, argumentative styles, and theoretical definitions, potentially restricting epistemic diversity. In the Latin American context, this problem is especially relevant because dependence on external conceptual repertoires may displace local research, situated educational experiences, and alternative forms of academic production. Universities must therefore identify and critically examine the epistemic colonization that may occur through seemingly neutral systems.

Students with limited socioeconomic resources tend to have an ambivalent relationship with AI. According to Vieriu & Petrea (2025), these tools may reduce access barriers, translate information, lower bibliographic costs, and offer personalized support. However, they may also provide closed, incomplete, or biased responses where sufficient information literacy is lacking. Nopas (2025) argues that individuals with greater cultural capital tend to use AI as an auxiliary thinking tool, whereas those without methodological training may become subordinate to automated answers. As Selwyn (2024) maintains, this divide is not accidental but structural, reflecting pre-existing inequalities in academic support, validation criteria, and mastery of research practices.

AI-assisted academic writing also poses an epistemic challenge because it may standardize styles, vocabularies, and argumentative structures. Such homogenization may produce formally correct yet conceptually weak texts, making it difficult to distinguish textual production from intellectual contribution. AI that improves rhetorical presentation without strengthening critical deliberation may create an appearance of rigor while reducing conceptual depth. In this regard, Sahin & Noroozi (2025) warn that education should not be reduced to measurable efficiency but should sustain

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processes of judgment, responsibility, and autonomy. Melisa et al. (2025) note that AI facilitates access, synthesis, and logical responses but may also displace research practices, the construction of an individual voice, and argumentative deliberation. Its effects should therefore be assessed beyond interaction metrics, considering whether it genuinely contributes to the development of epistemic autonomy.

Algorithmic Subjectivity of Students

Algorithmic mediation in higher education transforms not only academic procedures but also the ways in which student subjectivity is configured. Student activity tends to become flows of data that can be evaluated, compared, and quantified, altering the understanding of learning as an educational experience. Locky (2024) and Ni Putu Oka (2023) argue that academic activity is no longer conceived exclusively in terms of reflection, critical participation, and meaning construction but is increasingly oriented toward digital performance metrics. In this setting, connection times, query patterns, automated responses, and interaction trajectories become indicators used to classify, predict, and optimize academic behavior.

This transformation should not be interpreted solely as a technocratic reduction of learning, since AI may also enhance cognitive capacities when integrated according to sound pedagogical criteria. Holmes & Tuomi (2022), Pérez & Gómez Reyes (2025), and Aprilla Fortuna et al. (2025) argue that adaptive systems may personalize educational pathways, provide immediate feedback, and support learning processes in diverse contexts. However, these possibilities depend on the institutional, ethical, and pedagogical conditions of implementation. When AI is introduced into universities governed by the logics of ranking, efficiency, and control, personalization may become an algorithmic normalization of performance, directing students toward meeting indicators rather than developing critical judgment.

Educational datafication intensifies this ontological transformation by converting academic trajectories into predictive indicators of success, risk, or dropout. Students' academic identities are configured through early alerts, comparative metrics, and analytics systems that turn the educational process into an object of continuous observation. Within this framework, students not only learn with technologies but are also read, classified, and anticipated by them. This phenomenon raises a central question for contemporary universities: to what extent does educational analytics support learning, and at what point does it begin to redefine the university experience as algorithmic management of behavior?

The ontological alteration of the student manifests itself in a shift from being a reflective learner toward becoming a datafied subject who can be optimized and continuously evaluated. This tension is heightened among students experiencing technological inequality, who may be caught between the need to use algorithmic tools and a lack of criteria for interpreting them critically. Under such conditions, students tend to redefine themselves less as constructors of knowledge and more as strategic managers of academic performance. The problem lies not only in the tool but also in how institutions configure environments in which optimizing measurable trajectories may displace deliberation, creativity, and intellectual autonomy.

Inequality and the Digital Divide

The relationship between emerging educational technologies and students is profoundly conditioned by socioeconomic inequality. AI is not appropriated uniformly, because its use depends on material access, digital skills, cultural capital, methodological training, and individuals' critical capacity. Turpo-Gebera et al. (2025) show that the contemporary digital divide extends beyond internet access to include inequalities in practical skills, information literacy, and analytical capacity in complex digital environments. Similarly, Belitz (2025) notes that students with greater cultural capital may use AI as intellectual support, whereas those with less technological training tend to accept automated responses without assessing their validity, sources, or biases.

Material inequality is intertwined with an often-overlooked ethical divide. Rane (2023) argues that many universities have responded to AI use through policies focused on surveillance and

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sanctions. Cotton et al. (2024) acknowledge that detection systems may help prevent academic fraud in contexts of widespread use of generative tools. However, Noble (2018) and Zuboff (2020) warn that reliance on private platforms also involves surrendering data, extracting information, and consolidating algorithmic capital. From this perspective, university policies cannot be limited to detecting or penalizing misuse; they must also promote ethical, epistemic, and methodological criteria for critically appropriating AI.

Furthermore, Kizilcec & Lee (2022) argue that algorithmic fairness requires systematic programs of ethical and digital literacy, particularly for students using free versions of AI who may accept hallucinations as valid academic information. This risk increases when students are unfamiliar with citation standards, source comparison, and scientific validation, making them more vulnerable to academic errors or accusations of plagiarism. Consequently, inequality in AI use reflects not only differences in technological access but also differences in the capacity to interpret, question, and regulate algorithmic tools within rigorous university practices.

Focusing the institutional response exclusively on surveillance may reproduce pre-existing educational inequalities. Students with less academic capital are more likely to make procedural errors because of lack of knowledge, not necessarily fraudulent intent. Responsibility should therefore not rest solely with individuals but also with institutions, which must guarantee education in media literacy, data ethics, academic writing, source verification, and critical AI use. From this perspective, a university committed to equity should not limit itself to regulating AI as a threat but should integrate it as an object of critical education, epistemic justice, and responsible democratization of knowledge.

Conclusion

The epistemic position developed in this essay makes it possible to reformulate the central idea presented in the introduction by arguing that AI in higher education does not operate as a neutral agent or an inherently democratizing technology. Its educational potential depends on the institutional, pedagogical, ethical, and sociocultural conditions under which it is designed, implemented, and appropriated. In this sense, the analysis suggests that the promise of educational transformation associated with AI may be constrained by logics of efficiency, surveillance, data commodification, and institutional optimization, which may reproduce socioeconomic, epistemic, and ontological inequalities when not accompanied by critical criteria of educational justice.

Drawing on the arguments developed, the essay proposes understanding AI not only as a technological tool but also as a sociotechnical system that reconfigures forms of knowledge production, validation, and appropriation within universities. This position shifts the analysis from operational efficiency toward epistemic justice, cognitive autonomy, and students' critical education. Accordingly, the essay's central contribution lies in integrating epistemological, ontological, and social dimensions that are often examined separately, showing that AI does not transform higher education on its own but amplifies existing institutional rationalities, inequalities, and priorities.

The educational and social implications of this analysis highlight the need to reconsider institutional policies, pedagogical models, and programs of digital, ethical, and epistemic literacy in higher education, particularly in contexts marked by inequality. As a limitation, the essay acknowledges that its scope is based on a critical and interpretive review of the literature, without direct empirical validation in specific university communities. Future research should therefore examine how students with different levels of cultural capital use AI, what effects it has on academic autonomy, and which pedagogical strategies can favor the critical, equitable, and responsible integration of these technologies.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct of this study or the interpretation of its findings. Furthermore, they confirm that they have no personal, academic, professional, or financial relationships that could influence the development, conclusions, or interpretation of this work.

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Ethics Statement

This study did not require approval from an institutional ethics committee or informed consent, as it was conducted exclusively through a critical review and analysis of scientific and academic literature, without involving human participants, experimental interventions, or the processing of identifiable personal data. Throughout the research process, the authors adhered to the principles of academic integrity, proper source attribution, scientific rigor, and responsible use of information.

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