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Research paper

From AI Adoption to AI Governance: Developing a Buddhist Interpretive Framework for Higher Education

Svangnabha Tuanpusa[1]*, Thongdee Sritragarn[2], Yudthavee Kaewthongyai[2], Pongpith Tuenpusa[1]

[1] *Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi,* THAILAND
[2] *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University,* THAILAND

***Corresponding Author:** svangnabha@rmutt.ac.th

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence is increasingly being adopted in higher education to support teaching, learning, administration, quality assurance, and institutional planning. However, much of the current discussion remains focused on adoption, efficiency, and technological capability, with less attention to the interpretive and governance conditions required for responsible institutional use. This article addresses that gap by developing a Buddhist interpretive framework for AI governance in higher education. Drawing on a qualitative study based on semi-structured individual interviews with 16 key informants, a focus group discussion with 9 additional participants, and document analysis of relevant academic and policy literature, the study explores how AI is understood, justified, and governed within university contexts. Data were triangulated across all three sources to strengthen interpretive validity. The analysis identifies four major themes: AI as an institutional governance project; AI as a system-shaping force across core university functions; responsible AI as dependent on enabling conditions and safeguards; and an interpretive logic among participants that aligns with the four dimensions of Patisambhida. Rather than treating Buddhist thought as a symbolic ethical add-on, the article reinterprets Patisambhida as an interpretive governance architecture for AI: *Attha* as purpose governance, *Dhamma* as principle governance, *Nirutti* as communicative governance, and *Patibhana* as judgment governance. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework that may help explain how universities can move from AI adoption toward human-centered AI governance.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, higher education, AI governance, human-centered AI, Buddhist interpretive framework, Patisambhida

Artificial intelligence has moved rapidly from experimental innovation to an everyday institutional presence in higher education. Universities now use AI-supported systems in teaching and learning, student support, assessment, research assistance, quality assurance, and administrative decision-making. In many contexts, AI is presented as a solution for improving efficiency, personalization, prediction, and responsiveness across core university functions. At the same time, its rapid adoption has generated growing concern over bias, opacity, data governance, de-skilling, over-automation, and the weakening of human judgment in academic and administrative settings. Recent scholarship has argued that AI should not be understood merely as a technical tool, but as a social, ethical, and governance challenge that reshapes how institutions define responsibility, legitimacy, and human agency (Crawford, 2021; Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025).

Within higher education, this shift is especially significant. Universities are not only sites of technological implementation but also normative institutions responsible for public knowledge, ethical formation, critical inquiry, and the cultivation of human judgment. As a result, the question is no longer simply whether institutions can adopt AI, but how they should govern it. This requires moving beyond instrumental discussions of readiness and efficiency toward a broader understanding of the values, interpretive assumptions, and decision structures that shape AI use in academic life. Human-centered AI scholarship has made an important contribution in this regard by emphasizing accountability, inclusion, participation, and human flourishing (Sarkar, 2025; Shneiderman, 2022). Yet a persistent gap remains between broad ethical principles and context-sensitive governance frameworks that institutions can use in practice. Even where ethical concerns are acknowledged, organizations often struggle to translate them into actionable interpretive structures capable of guiding institutional judgment, communication, and policy formation. In this sense, the challenge is not only technological adoption but also governance translation (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Sarkar, 2025).

This article argues that higher education needs an interpretive approach to AI governance. Such an approach must explain not only what institutions do with AI, but also how they determine the purposes of AI use, how they understand its operating logic and limits, how they communicate with and about AI systems, and how final judgment remains with human actors. To address this need, the article develops a Buddhist interpretive framework based on Patisambhida, a fourfold structure of discernment concerning meaning, principle, expression, and practical intelligence. Rather than using Buddhist thought as a general moral backdrop, this study treats Patisambhida as an analytic architecture for institutional AI governance. Reinterpreted in contemporary terms, the framework identifies four interrelated governance dimensions: *Attha* as purpose governance, *Dhamma* as principle governance, *Nirutti* as communicative governance, and *Patibhana* as judgment governance. Together, these dimensions offer a way to understand AI not as an autonomous decision-maker but as a mediated institutional instrument requiring human interpretation, moral orientation, and contextual control.

The framework is developed from a qualitative study of AI use in higher education employing three complementary methods: semi-structured individual interviews with 16 key informants, a focus group discussion with 9 additional participants, and document analysis of relevant academic and policy literature. Data were triangulated across these three sources to strengthen interpretive depth and analytic consistency. The findings suggest that AI integration is perceived not merely as a technical issue, but as an organizational and governance challenge involving staff capability, strategic direction, data quality, ethical safeguards, leadership commitment, and change management. Participants consistently emphasized that AI should support rather than replace human judgment, and that successful implementation depends on both institutional planning and human oversight. The analysis also suggests that the four dimensions of Patisambhida provide a meaningful interpretive structure for organizing these concerns into a coherent governance model. This makes it possible to move from descriptive accounts of AI adoption toward a theory-building contribution that may explain the governance conditions of responsible AI use in higher education. The article therefore speaks to an interdisciplinary readership concerned with AI, education, governance, ethics, and culturally grounded approaches to institutional transformation.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, it reviews key debates on AI in higher education, human-centered AI, and interpretive approaches to governance. It then outlines the qualitative design of the study and explains how the empirical material was analyzed. The findings section identifies major institutional themes emerging from the interviews and shows how these themes can be reinterpreted through Patisambhida. The discussion then develops the Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework and considers its implications for higher education governance in an era of AI-mediated institutional change.

Statement of contribution

This article makes three contributions to interdisciplinary research on artificial intelligence and society.

First, it provides qualitative evidence that AI integration in higher education is understood by institutional actors not merely as a matter of technological adoption, but as a governance issue involving staff capability, data quality, leadership, strategic planning, ethics, and change management.

Second, it reconceptualizes the Buddhist concept of Patisambhida as an interpretive lens for AI governance in higher education. In this formulation, *Attha* addresses institutional purpose, *Dhamma* addresses governing principles and limits, *Nirutti* addresses communication and translation, and *Patibhana* addresses prudent human judgment in the use of AI-generated outputs.

Third, it develops a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework that may help explain how universities can move from AI adoption to human-centered AI governance. By doing so, the article bridges a persistent gap between abstract AI ethics and institutionally usable governance architecture, while also contributing a context-sensitive perspective from higher education in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI in higher education: From technological adoption to institutional governance

Artificial intelligence has become increasingly prominent in higher education, where it is used to support teaching and learning, student advising, assessment, research assistance, quality assurance, data analytics, and administrative planning. Existing scholarship has documented the expanding educational applications of AI, including adaptive learning, intelligent tutoring systems, automated feedback, chatbots, and predictive analytics (Acar et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Systematic reviews across this body of work indicate that the majority of studies focus on learning outcomes, usability, and technology acceptance, with comparatively less attention directed toward institutional governance, equity, and power (Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). At the same time, this literature consistently notes that the introduction of AI into educational environments is accompanied by substantial ethical and institutional concerns, including algorithmic bias, privacy risks, opacity, unequal access, and the potential weakening of relational and human dimensions of education (Acar et al., 2025; Baker & Hawn, 2022; Crawford, 2021). Recent reviews further emphasize that AI should augment rather than replace educators and that successful implementation depends on strong governance structures, human-centered training, and institutional readiness rather than technical deployment alone (Acar et al., 2025; Ismayil et al., 2026; Lee et al., 2025; Shneiderman, 2022).

Despite this growing body of work, much of the literature on AI in education still privileges questions of functionality, effectiveness, and innovation over questions of governance. In many studies, AI appears primarily as a tool to improve performance, personalize learning, or optimize organizational processes. While these contributions are valuable, they often leave underdeveloped the interpretive and institutional conditions under which AI should be used. Critical perspectives have argued that AI in education is not a neutral technology but one that reinforces existing structures of power, marketization, and surveillance, embedding particular assumptions about knowledge, efficiency, and human capability into institutional practice (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson et al., 2020). In higher education, this limitation is significant because universities are not simply delivery platforms for technological efficiency. They are public-facing institutions charged with cultivating critical reasoning, ethical judgment, and social responsibility. Accordingly, AI in higher education must be understood not only as an educational technology issue but also as a governance issue involving institutional purpose, legitimacy, accountability, and the preservation of human judgment (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Holmes et al., 2022; Shneiderman, 2022).

This need for a governance-oriented perspective is especially visible in empirical contexts where institutional actors do not describe AI merely in terms of tools or applications, but in terms of staffing, strategic planning, data quality, oversight, and evaluation. The qualitative material used for this study suggests that participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of staff capability development, big data analysis, strategic planning, human oversight, and ongoing evaluation. They also identified structural preconditions such as leadership, data infrastructure, organizational planning, and ethical control mechanisms as central to effective AI integration. These concerns indicate that the movement from AI adoption to AI governance is not an abstract theoretical shift, but a practical institutional necessity.

Human-centered AI and the implementation gap

Human-centered AI has emerged as one of the most important frameworks for rethinking the social role of AI. Rather than evaluating AI only through efficiency, scalability, or automation, human-centered approaches emphasize accountability, inclusion, transparency, participation, autonomy, and human flourishing (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Sarkar, 2025; Shneiderman, 2022). In this view, AI systems should be designed and governed in ways that enhance rather than diminish human capacities and institutional legitimacy. Human-centered AI therefore moves beyond compliance-oriented ethics and asks how AI can remain aligned with human values, democratic processes, and context-sensitive judgment. A global mapping of AI ethics guidelines by Jobin et al. (2019) identified five convergent principles spanning transparency, justice, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy, yet also found significant divergence in how these principles are prioritized and operationalized across national and institutional contexts. This divergence reinforces the need for context-sensitive governance frameworks rather than universally applied ethical checklists.

This orientation is particularly relevant to higher education. Universities require governance models that can balance innovation with academic values, data-driven decision-making with human discretion, and automation with the educational mission of forming reflective and responsible persons. The UNESCO (2021) Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence has affirmed that AI governance in education must respect human dignity, diversity, and the fundamental role of human educators, emphasizing that AI should be used to augment rather than replace human judgment. Recent interdisciplinary discussions have stressed that the

procedural legitimacy of AI systems matters as much as their technical performance. Questions such as who defines the goals of AI use, whose interests are represented, how risks are interpreted, and who retains final decision-making authority are now central to responsible governance (Dalgalıdere, 2025; Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Sarkar, 2025).

However, a persistent implementation gap remains between abstract ethical principles and institutionally usable governance frameworks. Existing human-centered AI scholarship offers important normative guidance, but organizations often struggle to translate these broad principles into structures that can guide everyday interpretation and decision-making. This gap has been described as one of engagement, translation, and dialogue, where high-level principles are not adequately converted into context-sensitive institutional practices (Sarkar, 2025; Katz, 2026). In higher education, this problem is intensified by the complexity of academic organizations, where AI may affect multiple domains simultaneously, including pedagogy, administration, assessment, quality assurance, and research support.

The present article responds to this gap by arguing that AI governance in higher education requires an interpretive architecture, not simply a list of ethical principles. What institutions need is not only guidance on what values matter, but also a structured way to interpret purpose, principles, communication, and judgment in relation to AI use. This is where Buddhist thought becomes analytically useful.

Buddhist interpretive thought as a governance resource

Most contemporary AI governance frameworks emerge from secular ethics, law, policy studies, or design theory. While these traditions remain essential, they do not exhaust the possible conceptual resources for understanding how human beings should relate to intelligent systems. There is growing recognition in interdisciplinary AI scholarship that context-sensitive, non-Western, and relational knowledge traditions can enrich the conceptual foundations of AI governance, particularly where dominant frameworks remain too universalized or detached from local institutional cultures (Dignum, 2019; Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025; Sarkar, 2025). Comparative scholarship on AI ethics has noted that different cultural traditions offer distinct normative emphases: Confucian frameworks stress relational harmony and social responsibility; Ubuntu-inspired perspectives foreground communal interdependence; and Buddhist frameworks emphasize intentionality, discernment, and the ethical weight of cognitive processes (Jobin et al., 2019). These traditions are not merely alternatives to Western governance models but complementary lenses that may reveal dimensions of AI governance that proceduralist or rights-based frameworks tend to obscure (Chaimongkol & Rattanakantadilok, 2026; Sultan et al., 2025).

Within this broader discussion, Buddhist thought offers a potentially valuable interpretive resource because it places strong emphasis on discernment, intentionality, relational understanding, and the wise use of knowledge. For the purposes of this article, the relevant concept is Patisambhida, which can be understood as a fourfold structure of analytical discernment involving meaning, principle, expression, and practical intelligence. In classical terms, these dimensions are *Attha*, *Dhamma*, *Nirutti*, and *Patibhana*. Rather than treating these simply as religious categories, this study reinterprets them as institutional dimensions of AI governance.

Under this reinterpretation, *Attha* refers to purpose governance: the clarification of why AI is being used and what educational or organizational goods it is meant to serve. *Dhamma* refers to principle governance: the understanding of how AI works, what its limits are, and what normative principles should constrain its use. *Nirutti* refers to communicative governance: the capacity to translate needs, instructions, meanings, and institutional expectations across human and machine systems. *Patibhana* refers to judgment governance: the prudent use of human discretion in interpreting and applying AI outputs, especially where contextual or ethical decisions are required. This reinterpretation is not intended to claim that Patisambhida is equivalent to existing governance frameworks, but rather that it offers a distinctive and culturally grounded articulation of governance concerns that converges with, and in some respects extends, the emphases of human-centered AI scholarship.

Importantly, this framework differs from other non-Western governance proposals in its emphasis on discernment as a multi-layered cognitive-institutional practice rather than as a set of relational obligations or communal norms. While Confucian governance frameworks tend to foreground role-based responsibility and Ubuntu frameworks emphasize collective agency, Patisambhida draws attention to the interpretive and epistemic dimensions of governance: how actors make meaning of AI outputs, what conceptual structures guide their judgments, and how communicative clarity shapes responsible use. This emphasis on interpretive practice is particularly well-suited to the theory-building aims of the present study, which seeks to explain not just what values should guide AI use, but how institutions can organize their cognitive and communicative practices to enact those values.

This interpretive move is supported by the qualitative evidence in the present study. The interview material suggests that participants already frame AI through concerns that correspond closely to these four dimensions. They emphasize the need for clear goals, principled understanding, meaningful communication, and retained

human judgment. The data also indicate that AI use is considered legitimate only when technological intelligence is balanced with social responsibility and moral awareness. The significance of Patisambhida in this article, therefore, is not merely symbolic or cultural. It serves as the basis for theory-building by providing an interpretive governance architecture that can connect empirical concerns with a coherent institutional framework.

Research gap and analytical direction

The literature reviewed above points to three unresolved challenges. First, research on AI in higher education has expanded rapidly, but much of it remains centered on tools, applications, and adoption rather than governance (Acar et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Second, human-centered AI has clarified the importance of values, participation, and accountability, yet it still leaves institutions with an implementation gap between normative aspiration and practical governance (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Gjini & Hernandez-Gantes, 2025; Jobin et al., 2019; Sarkar, 2025; Shneiderman, 2022). Third, although there is growing interest in culturally grounded and non-Western perspectives on AI ethics, fewer studies have used such traditions to build empirically informed governance frameworks for higher education (Dignum, 2019; Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025).

This article addresses these gaps by developing a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework based on qualitative evidence from higher education stakeholders. It does not use Buddhist thought as a decorative ethical supplement. Instead, it uses Patisambhida as a theory-building device for explaining how universities can govern AI through four interrelated dimensions: purpose, principle, communication, and judgment. In doing so, the article shifts the conversation from AI adoption to AI governance and contributes a context-sensitive framework to interdisciplinary scholarship on artificial intelligence and society.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design in order to examine how key actors in higher education understand the role of artificial intelligence in academic administration and how these understandings can be developed into a governance framework. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore meanings, expectations, concerns, and institutional reasoning that could not be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. More specifically, the study aimed not only to document participants' views on AI use, but also to generate a conceptual framework from those views through an interpretive process informed by Buddhist thought.

The research design employed three complementary methods of data collection and analysis: semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and researcher-conducted document analysis of relevant academic and policy literature. These three sources were used in combination to enable methodological triangulation, strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings. The interviews and focus group generated primary empirical data on participants' perspectives, experiences, and institutional reasoning, while document analysis provided a secondary evidential layer to verify, contextualize, and extend interpretations arising from the interview data. This combination enabled the study to identify recurrent institutional concerns surrounding AI use while preserving the explanatory and interpretive richness of participants' accounts. The design was therefore suited to the study's theory-building objective: to move from empirical accounts of AI use in higher education to a structured interpretive governance framework.

Participants and sampling

The study involved a total of 25 participants drawn from two distinct groups. The first group comprised 16 key informants selected through purposive sampling for individual in-depth interviews. These participants were chosen because they occupied positions likely to provide informed perspectives on AI integration in higher education from different institutional standpoints. The sample included four sub-groups: seven lecturers with experience using AI (43.8%), three experts in AI and educational technology (18.8%), two senior administrators (12.5%), and four specialists in Buddhist educational administration (25.0%). This composition was intended to capture perspectives across operational, technical, managerial, and philosophical or normative levels of institutional life. The second group comprised 9 additional participants recruited specifically for the focus group discussion. These participants were selected separately from the 16 interview informants to provide a distinct collective perspective on shared institutional concerns. The focus group composition was designed to complement the individual interview sample by representing a broader cross-section of institutional roles and enabling deliberative exchange that individual interviews alone could not capture. Purposive sampling was used

for both groups, with the overall aim of ensuring variation in institutional position, level of experience with AI, and depth of engagement with governance and values questions rather than achieving statistical representation.

The sample was designed to ensure variation rather than statistical representation. In particular, it enabled the study to bring together voices concerned with daily use, institutional planning, technological affordances, and value-based interpretation. This diversity was important because the article aimed to understand AI governance as a multi-level institutional phenomenon rather than as a purely technical or individual matter. The inclusion of participants with Buddhist educational expertise was especially significant, as it allowed the study to explore whether and how Patisambhida could function as a meaningful interpretive lens rather than being imposed externally upon the data.

Data collection

Data were collected through three complementary methods conducted during 2024–2025: semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and document analysis. The documentary materials comprised scholarly and policy texts selected for their relevance to AI governance, higher education, and Buddhist educational philosophy, and were used to verify, contextualize, and extend interpretations emerging from the interview data. Individual interviews were conducted with 16 key informants and served as the primary data source. This method allowed participants to explain not only what they thought about AI in higher education, but also why they held those views and how they understood the opportunities and risks involved. All interviews were conducted in Thai using a semi-structured guide, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated and analyzed in both Thai and English to ensure fidelity to participants' original expressions. The focus group discussion involved 9 separate participants who were recruited independently from the 16 interview informants, bringing the total number of human participants to 25. The focus group served as a complementary method to explore areas of convergence and divergence across a broader participant group, to facilitate deliberative exchange on shared institutional concerns, and to triangulate themes emerging from the individual interviews. The focus group was conducted in Thai, facilitated using a structured discussion guide, and recorded and transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews. Document analysis constituted the third data source. The researcher systematically examined relevant academic literature and research documents related to AI governance, higher education, human-centered AI, and Buddhist educational philosophy. This analysis was conducted to verify and contextualize interpretations arising from the interview and focus group data, and to identify points of convergence and divergence between participant accounts and existing scholarly frameworks. Document analysis therefore served as a methodological triangulation strategy rather than a separate analytic strand, strengthening the overall credibility and interpretive depth of the study.

The interviews and focus group elicited reflections on institutional needs, implementation conditions, obstacles, ethical considerations, and the relationship between AI use and human judgment. The data showed that participants consistently emphasized the need for staff development, big data analysis, strategic planning, human oversight, and evaluation systems in relation to AI adoption. They also discussed the importance of leadership, data infrastructure, ethics, governance, and change management, as well as barriers such as lack of expertise, resistance to change, limited budgets, and poor-quality data. These themes provided the empirical foundation for the interpretive work developed later in the article.

Data analysis

Data from all three sources were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following a multi-stage analytical process. Analysis of interview and focus group transcripts proceeded through five explicit stages designed to ensure both descriptive accuracy and interpretive rigor.

In the first stage, all interview and focus group transcripts were read repeatedly in both Thai and English to develop familiarity with the full range of participants' concerns, institutional framings, and recurring emphases. This immersive reading enabled the analyst to identify candidate themes and note initial observations without imposing premature categories.

In the second stage, initial open codes were generated directly from participants' own language. Codes were assigned to discrete units of meaning—phrases, sentences, or short passages—and were grounded in the expressed concerns of participants rather than in theoretical categories. At this stage, the analysis remained descriptive rather than interpretive. A total of over 180 initial codes were generated across the full dataset.

In the third stage, codes with similar referents or related concerns were grouped into broader thematic categories through a process of focused coding. These categories included institutional readiness, staff capability, planning and strategy, data governance, ethical concern, communication practices, and human oversight. At this

stage, the analysis moved from individual coded units to patterns that recurred across multiple participants and data sources.

In the fourth stage, the analysis moved from thematic description to interpretive synthesis by examining how the emergent categories could be understood through the four dimensions of Patisambhida. This interpretive stage was central to the study. Rather than applying Patisambhida mechanically as a pre-existing template, the analysis used it as a sensitizing conceptual structure through which the themes could be reorganized and reinterpreted. For example, participants' repeated emphasis on clear institutional goals was interpreted through *Attha*; their concern with understanding AI mechanisms and limitations through *Dhamma*; their focus on prompt writing, translation, and communication through *Nirutti*; and their insistence that AI should support rather than replace human decision-making through *Patibhana*. The mapping between empirical themes and Patisambhida dimensions was not assumed at the outset but emerged iteratively through repeated comparison between the data and the conceptual framework.

In the fifth stage, document analysis provided a third analytical layer, used to verify emergent themes against existing literature and to identify convergences and divergences between participant accounts and scholarly frameworks. Where participant accounts aligned closely with themes in the governance and human-centered AI literature, this convergence was noted as reinforcing the interpretive plausibility of the framework. Where divergences emerged, these were examined to understand their significance for theory-building. This triangulated approach made the study not only descriptive but also theory-building in orientation.

All interview and focus group transcripts were translated and analyzed in both Thai and English to ensure fidelity to participants' original expressions. The resulting framework was anchored in interview evidence while remaining conceptually generative. It is important to note that the article does not claim that participants themselves explicitly used the language of AI governance theory. Rather, it argues that their accounts reveal a patterned institutional logic that can be meaningfully interpreted through Patisambhida and developed into a governance architecture for higher education.

Trustworthiness and analytical rigor

Several strategies were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the study drew on a purposively varied sample of 25 participants spanning policy, management, operational, technical, and Buddhist educational perspectives across two distinct participant groups, which supported breadth of interpretation. Second, methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of three data sources—individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and document analysis—allowing themes to be verified and cross-checked across multiple evidential layers. Third, the analysis was grounded in recurring themes that appeared across both the interview set and focus group data rather than isolated quotations. Fourth, the interpretive framework was developed through iterative comparison between empirical themes and conceptual categories, rather than by imposing a rigid doctrinal structure from the outset.

The use of qualitative content analysis also supported analytic transparency by making it possible to trace how empirical concerns were translated into higher-order categories and then into framework dimensions. The resulting framework was therefore anchored in interview evidence while remaining conceptually generative. This is important because the article does not claim that participants themselves explicitly used the language of AI governance theory. Rather, it argues that their accounts reveal a patterned institutional logic that can be meaningfully interpreted through Patisambhida and developed into a governance architecture for higher education.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethics exemption from the relevant institutional research ethics committee, in accordance with institutional guidelines for qualitative research involving voluntary adult participants in non-sensitive educational contexts. All participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and the procedures for data handling and anonymization. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. Interview data were used solely for scholarly analysis. In reporting the findings, the study refers to interviewees by number rather than by name or institutional identifier in order to preserve anonymity and reduce potential institutional risk.

FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis revealed that participants did not view AI in higher education merely as a collection of digital tools or technical applications. Instead, they framed AI as an institutional issue requiring strategic direction, human oversight, ethical safeguards, communication capacity, and judgment in use. Across the

interview data, four major themes emerged. Together, these themes show a movement from technological adoption toward governance-oriented interpretation. They also provide the empirical basis for developing the Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework proposed in this article.

AI as an institutional project rather than a stand-alone technology

The first major theme concerns the way participants framed AI as an institutional project rather than a self-sufficient technical solution. Interviewees consistently emphasized that AI implementation in higher education depends on organizational readiness, staff capability, and strategic planning. The most frequently mentioned concerns were the need to develop personnel skills and the use of AI for big data analysis, each raised by 15 of the 16 participants (93.8%). Strategic planning was also strongly emphasized, with 13 participants (81.3%) noting that AI adoption must be linked to institutional management rather than treated as a separate technological intervention. In addition, 12 participants (75.0%) stressed that AI should function as a support tool rather than a replacement for human decision-making, while 11 participants (68.8%) highlighted the importance of ongoing evaluation and monitoring.

These findings indicate that participants did not imagine AI as an isolated innovation. Instead, they saw it as something that must be embedded within university structures, leadership processes, and long-term planning. AI was therefore interpreted less as a matter of procurement or software deployment and more as a matter of institutional alignment. This is particularly important for the present article because it suggests that the relevant question is not simply whether universities adopt AI, but whether they do so with a coherent understanding of organizational purpose, data use, and human responsibility. In other words, the empirical material already points beyond adoption toward governance.

> "AI should not be introduced simply because it is fashionable. It must be aligned with the university's mission and with what we want our students and staff to become" (Interviewee 3). Another participant similarly noted, "Using AI to analyze large datasets allows us to see trends and patterns that humans might not be able to detect, but those insights only become meaningful when they are connected to strategic planning" (Interviewee 5).

AI is expected to strengthen the core functions of higher education

The second theme concerns the domains in which participants expected AI to make the greatest contribution. In this section, the frequencies refer to coded references in the qualitative dataset rather than to the number of individual participants. The data show that universities expect AI to support core institutional functions rather than peripheral activities. The most frequently mentioned area was teaching and learning (48 coded references), described in relation to learning activities, 24/7 chatbot support, and personalized learning. This was followed closely by administration and management (45 coded references), including strategic planning, resource allocation, and educational forecasting. Research and development was also highly emphasized (42 coded references), especially in relation to trend analysis, big data, and plagiarism detection. Other important domains included quality assurance (35 coded references), curriculum development (32 coded references), student development (28 coded references), academic services (25 coded references), and resource management (22 coded references).

What is striking in these findings is that participants did not restrict AI to classroom enhancement alone. They positioned it across the full architecture of higher education, from pedagogy to governance, from academic planning to institutional quality systems. This broad distribution of expected uses indicates that AI is already being imagined as a system-shaping force within higher education. At the same time, the diversity of these applications increases the need for governance because decisions made in one domain may affect values, responsibilities, and risks in another. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that higher education institutions require a structured interpretive framework for coordinating AI across multiple functional areas.

> "AI can support teaching, but it can also help with forecasting, strategic planning, and quality assurance. The issue is no longer whether AI belongs in the university, but how broadly and responsibly it should be used" (Interviewee 7).

Responsible AI depends on enabling conditions and institutional safeguards

The third theme concerns the conditions that participants considered necessary for successful and responsible AI integration. Five enabling factors were repeatedly identified: personnel development, data infrastructure, leadership and vision, change management, and ethics or governance. Participants stressed that AI literacy and specialized skills must be developed continuously. They also emphasized that data quality is foundational because AI systems cannot function effectively without reliable data. Leadership commitment was described as essential, especially where institutional change requires more than symbolic policy statements. Change management was

another recurrent concern, with participants noting that staff acceptance depends on visible benefits and structured implementation processes. Finally, respondents indicated that AI must be governed by explicit ethical and regulatory rules.

The obstacles identified by participants mirror these success conditions. The most frequently cited barrier was a lack of expert personnel, mentioned by 14 participants (87.5%). This was followed by resistance to change, mentioned by 12 participants (75.0%), budget limitations, mentioned by 11 participants (68.8%), and weak or inadequate data, mentioned by 10 participants (62.5%). Security concerns were also raised, although less frequently. These barriers reveal that the problem of AI integration is not simply a lack of tools or interest. It is a deeper institutional challenge involving organizational culture, infrastructure, trust, and governance capacity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that responsible AI in higher education is contingent on more than technical readiness. It depends on institutional safeguards that connect human capability, data quality, leadership, and ethical oversight. This theme is central to the article's argument because it indicates that governance is not an external add-on to AI implementation. It is one of the conditions that make implementation possible in the first place.

> "If the university does not invest in people, data systems, and ethics, AI will only magnify existing problems rather than solve them" (Interviewee 10).

Participants articulated an interpretive logic that aligns with patisambhida

The fourth theme concerns the interpretive structure underlying participants' descriptions of AI use. When the interview material was re-examined through the lens of Patisambhida, a patterned logic became visible. Participants consistently referred to four interrelated concerns: the need to define the purpose of AI clearly, the need to understand how AI works and where its limits lie, the need to communicate effectively with AI systems and among institutional actors, and the need to retain human judgment in interpreting and applying AI outputs. These concerns correspond closely to the four dimensions of Patisambhida: *Attha*, *Dhamma*, *Nirutti*, and *Patibhana*.

Attha appears in participants' insistence that AI must begin with a clear educational purpose and authentic institutional goals. *Dhamma* appears in the repeated emphasis on understanding AI's operating principles, limitations, and appropriate conditions of use. *Nirutti* appears in the discussion of language, especially in the framing of prompt writing as a process of translating human intention into a form that AI can understand and respond to effectively. *Patibhana* appears in participants' insistence that AI outputs should inform decision-making but should not replace human decision-makers.

This finding is analytically important for the article's contribution. It suggests that the Buddhist component of the study is not merely symbolic or decorative. The qualitative data indicate an interpretive logic that can be meaningfully reorganized through Patisambhida into a governance architecture. The interviews therefore do more than describe attitudes toward AI; they provide the empirical basis for a theory-building move: the development of a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework for higher education.

> "Prompt writing is like translating our human intention into a language the system can understand" (Interviewee 12). Another participant emphasized, "AI can help us see possibilities, but final decisions must remain with people who understand the context, the values, and the consequences" (Interviewee 14).

This mapping is summarized in **Table 1**, which shows how the major empirical themes were reinterpreted through the four dimensions of Patisambhida to form the proposed governance framework.

Table 1

Mapping empirical themes onto the Buddhist interpretive governance framework

Empirical Theme	Interview Indication	Dimension	Governance Meaning
Clear goals and educational value	Strategic planning and organizational purpose were repeatedly emphasized	*Attha*	Purpose governance
Understanding AI mechanisms, limits, and risks	Data quality, AI literacy, and ethical safeguards were highlighted	*Dhamma*	Principle governance
Prompting, translation, and institutional communication	AI use was described as requiring communicative competence	*Nirutti*	Communicative governance
Human responsibility in final decisions	AI was viewed as support, not as a substitute for judgment	*Patibhana*	Judgment governance
Institutional conditions shape responsible AI	Leadership, staff development, infrastructure, and ethics were enabling conditions	Cross-cutting	Systemic governance
Barriers are structural and cultural	Lack of expertise, resistance, budget constraints, and weak data limited implementation	Cross-cutting	Governance capacity

Note. Interview quotations are discussed in the text to conserve table space and improve readability. Dimension names are rendered in italics to reflect their status as Pali technical terms. Cross-cutting dimensions indicate themes that span multiple governance levels and do not map exclusively to a single Patisambhida category.

Taken together, the findings indicate that participants understand AI in higher education as a matter of institutional purpose, operational principles, communication, and human judgment rather than as a purely technical innovation. The empirical material also suggests that successful AI integration depends on governance conditions such as leadership, data quality, staff capability, and ethical safeguards. Most importantly, the interview data can be reorganized through Patisambhida into a coherent interpretive structure. This sets up the next section, which develops these findings into a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework and discusses its implications for human-centered AI governance in higher education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that AI in higher education should be understood not merely as an issue of technological adoption, but as a problem of institutional governance. Participants did not describe AI primarily in terms of software features or technical innovation. Instead, they repeatedly emphasized staff capability, strategic planning, data quality, organizational readiness, ethical safeguards, communication, and the continuing role of human judgment. This pattern is consistent with the argument that higher education institutions do not simply need more AI tools; they need a coherent way to govern AI in relation to institutional purpose, normative principles, communicative practice, and responsible decision-making. The four themes identified through the qualitative content analysis therefore point beyond adoption toward governance as the central challenge. It is important to note that these interpretations are drawn from a purposive qualitative sample and are intended as analytically generative rather than universally definitive.

From adoption to governance

A central implication of the findings is that AI adoption is not self-explanatory. Even where participants recognized the potential of AI in teaching and learning, administration, research support, and quality assurance, they consistently treated implementation as dependent on broader institutional conditions. This is consistent with recent educational AI scholarship that argues AI integration is not only a technical matter, but also a socioeconomic, ethical, and governance issue requiring strong data governance, teacher development, and human-centered implementation (Acar et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022; Sarkar, 2025). The present study extends that line of argument by suggesting that institutional actors already think in governance terms, even when they do not explicitly use the language of AI governance theory. Their concerns about leadership, planning, ethics, evaluation, and oversight indicate that AI is being interpreted as an institutional system rather than as a stand-alone digital tool. This matters because universities are normative organizations. They must justify why AI is being used, under what conditions, through what forms of accountability, and with what limits on automation. In this sense, the findings are consistent with a shift from an implementation-centered discourse to a governance-centered one, though further research in other institutional settings would be needed to assess how broadly this pattern applies.

The contribution of a Buddhist interpretive governance framework

The main theoretical contribution of this article is the proposal of a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework grounded in Patisambhida. The value of this framework lies in its use of Patisambhida as an interpretive structure derived from the study's empirical themes rather than as a retrospective ethical overlay. It reorganizes the empirical findings into four dimensions of governance.

Attha reframes AI governance as a question of purpose. Participants repeatedly emphasized that AI use must begin with clear institutional goals and educational value, which indicates that governance may start not with the technical capacity of the system, but with the meaning of its intended use. *Dhamma* reframes governance as a question of principle. Concerns about data quality, AI limitations, ethical safeguards, and rules of use suggest that participants wanted AI to be governed through intelligibility and constraint, not blind trust. *Nirutti* highlights the communicative dimension of governance. The interview material showed that effective AI use may depend on translation: between institutional goals and technical instructions, between users and systems, and among organizational actors themselves. *Patibhana* emphasizes judgment. Participants clearly stated that AI should assist but not replace human decision-makers, especially where important educational or administrative decisions are involved. Together, these four dimensions reorganize the findings into a governance model centered on purpose, principle, communication, and judgment.

This move is important because it offers a theory-building response to a recurrent problem in AI ethics: the difficulty of translating abstract principles into organizational practice. The present framework addresses that gap by offering an interpretive structure through which institutions can make sense of AI use in context, rather than relying only on generalized ethical checklists (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Jobin et al., 2019; Sarkar, 2025). It is

acknowledged that the framework was developed from a purposive sample within a specific institutional and cultural context and should be understood as a theoretically provisional rather than a definitive model.

Relation to human-centered AI

The framework developed in this study also contributes to debates on human-centered AI. Recent work presents human-centered AI not simply as responsible design, but as an analytical and actionable governance paradigm grounded in accountability, inclusivity, participation, and human flourishing (Sarkar, 2025; Shneiderman, 2022). The findings of this study are broadly consistent with that perspective, but they also add a more explicit interpretive layer. Human-centered AI has clarified which values should guide AI development and governance, but it has been less explicit about how institutions should organize everyday interpretive practice around AI use within institutional settings. The Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework tentatively addresses that gap. It suggests that human-centeredness in higher education is not only a design aspiration or policy principle. It is also an interpretive discipline requiring institutions to clarify purpose, understand operational principles, communicate meaningfully across actors and systems, and preserve human judgment at the point of decision. In this sense, the framework complements human-centered AI by offering one possible way of operationalizing it as an institutional practice of interpretation and governance.

Another important point of convergence concerns contextuality. Human-centered AI is not a single template, but a flexible and context-dependent framework that must adapt across sectors and institutional settings (Shneiderman, 2022). This is especially relevant for higher education, where universities differ in mission, culture, infrastructure, and governance capacity. The framework proposed here reinforces that argument by suggesting how a culturally grounded interpretive tradition can be drawn upon to build a governance model suited to a particular educational context, while acknowledging that one universal model is unlikely to be sufficient (Dignum, 2019; Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025; Sarkar, 2025).

Implications for higher education policy and practice

The findings carry several possible implications for higher education institutions, though these should be read as analytically derived propositions rather than definitive prescriptions.

First, universities may benefit from framing AI policy not merely in terms of procurement, platform adoption, or productivity gains. AI policy could begin with institutional purpose: what educational goods the institution is trying to advance, what forms of academic and administrative work should remain human-led, and where AI can appropriately serve as augmentation rather than substitution. This reflects the *Attha* dimension of governance.

Second, institutions might invest in principle-based governance by strengthening AI literacy, data quality, ethical guidance, and operational transparency. Participants' repeated concern with expertise, infrastructure, and the limits of AI indicates that governance may require more than enthusiasm for innovation. It may require institutional competence and explicit rules. This reflects the *Dhamma* dimension.

Third, universities may benefit from recognizing communication as a governance issue. Prompting, translation, and shared understanding are not minor technical skills. They may form part of the communicative infrastructure through which AI becomes usable, interpretable, and governable. Training should therefore address not only how to use AI tools, but also how to communicate with and about them responsibly. This reflects the *Nirutti* dimension.

Fourth, institutions should protect the role of human judgment. The findings strongly indicate that participants regard AI as a support system rather than an authoritative decision-maker. Policies may therefore need to require meaningful human oversight in areas involving academic evaluation, student outcomes, personnel decisions, and strategic administration. This reflects the *Patibhana* dimension and is consistent with the broader human-centered AI literature that warns against de-skilling, disempowerment, and opaque algorithmic authority (Acar et al., 2025; Shneiderman, 2022).

Limitations and scope of interpretation

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Although the study involved 25 participants across two participant groups and employed methodological triangulation through interviews, a focus group discussion, and document analysis, the overall sample remained purposive and was drawn from a specific institutional and cultural context in Thailand. The aim was interpretive depth and conceptual development rather than statistical generalization. The framework should therefore be understood as analytically generative and contextually situated rather than universally definitive or directly transferable to other settings without adaptation.

In addition, while the study draws on Buddhist thought as an interpretive resource, it does not claim that Patisambhida is the only or superior framework for AI governance. Rather, it demonstrates that culturally grounded intellectual traditions can contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary AI scholarship when used rigorously and in dialogue with empirical data. The framework offered here represents one possible governance architecture among several that might be constructed from different philosophical traditions or empirical contexts.

A further limitation is that the framework has been developed from qualitative evidence and interpretive synthesis rather than from comparative institutional testing. Future studies could extend this work by applying the framework across different higher education settings, comparing it with other ethical or governance models such as Dignum's (2019) responsible AI framework or UNESCO's (2021) ethics recommendations, or examining how the four dimensions operate in specific institutional decisions involving generative AI, quality assurance, or academic administration.

Discussion synthesis

Overall, the discussion suggests that the empirical material is broadly consistent with a conceptual shift from AI adoption to AI governance. The four themes identified in the study reveal that institutional actors are already concerned with purpose, principles, communication, and judgment, even if these concerns are not always named in formal governance language. By interpreting these concerns through Patisambhida, the article develops a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework that offers a context-sensitive and human-centered model for governing AI in higher education. This contribution is both empirical and theoretical: empirical because it is grounded in qualitative evidence, and theoretical because it converts that evidence into an interpretive governance architecture that may guide future research, policy, and institutional practice. The framework is offered as a theoretically provisional and culturally situated contribution to ongoing interdisciplinary conversations about responsible AI in education.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the central challenge of artificial intelligence in higher education is not adoption alone, but governance. While AI is often introduced through the language of innovation, efficiency, and digital transformation, the qualitative evidence in this study suggests that institutional actors understand AI in much broader terms. Their concerns consistently centered on staff capability, strategic planning, data quality, ethical safeguards, communication, and the preservation of human judgment. These concerns indicate that AI in higher education may be better understood as an institutional and interpretive issue rather than a merely technical one, though the extent to which this finding applies beyond the specific context studied remains a question for future research.

In response to this problem, the article developed a Buddhist Interpretive Governance Framework grounded in Patisambhida. Rather than using Buddhist thought as a general ethical backdrop, the study reinterpreted *Attha*, *Dhamma*, *Nirutti*, and *Patibhana* as four dimensions of AI governance in higher education: purpose governance, principle governance, communicative governance, and judgment governance. This framework emerged from the qualitative findings and provides a structured way to explain how universities might move from AI adoption toward human-centered AI governance.

This article contributes by showing, first, that AI integration in higher education is perceived by institutional actors as a governance challenge rather than merely a technical process. Second, it develops an interpretive use of Patisambhida as a framework for thinking about AI governance through purpose, principle, communication, and judgment. Third, it offers a context-sensitive model that connects higher education, AI governance, human-centered design, and culturally grounded interpretive thought. The framework is presented as a theoretically provisional and culturally situated contribution rather than a universally applicable model.

The study also carries possible practical implications. Universities may benefit from not governing AI only through procurement or isolated policy statements. They might consider clarifying institutional purpose, strengthening AI literacy and data quality, building communicative capacity around AI use, and preserving meaningful human oversight in decisions that affect academic and administrative life. These implications are especially worth considering in contexts where institutions are rapidly adopting generative AI without sufficiently developed governance structures.

At the same time, the study has limitations. The framework was developed from a purposive qualitative sample within a specific cultural and institutional context and is intended as an interpretive and theory-building contribution rather than a universally generalizable model. Future research could test and refine the framework in other institutional settings, compare it with alternative ethical and governance models, or examine how the

four dimensions operate in specific domains such as assessment, quality assurance, student services, or academic administration.

Overall, this article suggests that the future of AI in higher education depends not only on smarter systems, but also on wiser institutions. The key question is not simply whether universities can use AI, but whether they can govern it in ways that remain purposeful, principled, communicative, and humanly responsible.

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Ethical statement

This study received ethics exemption from the relevant institutional research ethics committee, consistent with institutional guidelines for qualitative research involving voluntary adult participants in non-sensitive educational contexts. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, data handling procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data were anonymized, and participants are represented in the findings without personal or institutional identifiers.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Svangnabha Tuanpusa, Thongdee Sritragarn, Yudthavee Kaewthongyai, and Pongpith Tuenpusa contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the final manuscript.

Data availability

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality. Reasonable requests for further information may be directed to the corresponding author, subject to ethical considerations.

AI disclosure

Generative AI tools were used only to support language refinement, organization, and drafting assistance during manuscript preparation. All conceptual development, interpretation, argumentation, and final editorial responsibility remained with the authors.

Biographical sketch

Svangnabha Tuanpusa is a researcher affiliated with Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi (RMUTT), Pathum Thani, Thailand. Her research interests include artificial intelligence in higher education, academic management, and institutional development in technological university systems. She has been involved in mixed-methods research examining AI readiness and priority needs within the Rajamangala University of Technology system.

Thongdee Sritragarn is a faculty member at the Faculty of Education, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), Ayutthaya, Thailand. His research focuses on educational administration, institutional leadership, and the integration of technology in higher education management. He contributes expertise in qualitative research methods and educational policy analysis.

Yudthavee Kaewthongyai is a faculty member at the Faculty of Education, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), Ayutthaya, Thailand. His research interests include educational leadership, curriculum development, and digital transformation in higher education. He has contributed to research on institutional readiness and capability development in Thai universities.

Pongpith Tuenpusa is Assistant Professor at Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi (RMUTT), Pathum Thani, Thailand, where he is affiliated with the Faculty of Engineering. His research spans mechanical

engineering, renewable energy, and educational administration, with a particular focus on AI governance, institutional readiness, and digital transformation in Thai higher education.

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