Navigating AI and Inequality in HE learning spaces

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This panel will explore different dimensions of AI and inequality as it pertains to teaching and learning in higher education. It will ask what injustices AI will bring to HE, and how these can be addressed. It will also consider how AI itself can be used to help resolve existing inequalities in HE.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence, large language models, equity, inclusion, edtech

There is consensus that the most relevant emergent technology to be negotiated in HE is that of AI. While there is generally agreement that a major challenge of AI is that it is likely to be biased, the potential inequities of AI need further unpacking. Thus, this panel will explore different dimensions of AI and inequality as it pertains to teaching and learning in higher education. It will ask what injustices AI will bring to HE, and how these can be addressed. It will also ask how AI itself can be used to help resolve existing inequalities in HE.

AI has become ubiquitous in everyday life, implicating even those who are unconnected. As AI infiltrates daily routines, questions are raised about its social and ethical implications (Williamson & Eynon, 2020). The impact of AI in higher education is unpredictable, but even so, it is important to recognize that we are fast moving towards multiple learning scenarios where humans are teaming up with AI (Carvalho et al., 2022; Markauskaite et al., 2022). Future scenarios might include familiar interactions between humans, such as when students travel to a university campus to work with other students, or to interact with educators. But it is also easy to imagine how bots might play different roles in educational settings, and the need to consider social structures that are likely to impact these relations, influencing arrangements that might facilitate, foster, hinder, contrive interactions between humans and AI, with positive and negative outcomes (Martinez-Maldonado et al., 2021).

This panel will offer a multi-lens perspective, framed by Fraser's (2005) three forms of social injustice: economic (maldistribution), cultural (misrecognition); and political (misframing). This will mean looking at economic inequalities (e.g. unequal access, resources, cultural capital etc), cultural injustices (e.g. bias and misrepresentation in knowledge sets, the dominance of western epistemologies) and political inequities (e.g. power relations and decision-making processes, ownership of AI development in education).

The first inequality is always that of access; here questions of infrastructure are not only about equal access to AI technologies, WiFi, Internet connection and wider infrastructure, both on and off campuses when teaching offerings are blended and flexible. It is also about software models which, for example, change their offerings from free to subscriptions.

The panel will consider how AI can be used to address educational inequalities, for example, by powering accessible and assistive technologies (Zdravkova, 2022). It also has the potential to enhance learning for neurodivergent students and learners with disabilities. Issues here include how institutional policies and practices can ensure that all benefit from it (Addy et al., 2023).

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The panel will also explore ways of addressing this array of inequalities, mapping possible affirmative and transformative remedies (Fraser, 1995). At all key moments of technological change, new opportunities can be actively cultivated, with this panel focusing on how these opportunities can be leveraged towards social justice in education through short-to-medium term improvements and long-term transformations.

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