2025 Volume: 01 Issue: 06 www.ijrpa.com Review Article

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 194-208

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF ADAPTIVE LEARNING PLATFORM IN PERSONALIZING PATHWAYS AND ENHANCING STUDENT OUTCOMES.

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Article Received: 10 September 2025
Article Revised: 30 September 2025
Published on: 20 October 2025

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ABSTRACT

This article examined Artificial Intelligence-driven adaptive learning platforms and their impact on the performance of students in higher learning. Its limitations were evaluated alongside its opportunities via critical perspectives, theoretical insights, and empirical studies. Universities can deploy AI effectively, equitably, and inclusively if future research investigates areas where current evidence is lacking, as detailed stated in this article, as well as the impact of this application on diverse student cohorts. Six sections were employed as the backbone of this discussion. It started off with examining rising AI models while analyzing self-determination and constructivist perspectives in the context of student-based conceptual and theoretical foundations. Following closely was the assessment of contemporary higher learning in view of the function and design of adaptive platforms, and their mode of operation on site. Afterwards, the article analyzed contradictory or mixed discoveries while highlighting the academic and non-academic implications of these applications on students' performances. The next phase evaluated the ethical, pedagogical, and technical concerns, with more emphasis on underrepresented and diverse groups by underscoring areas for practice, policy, and future research. The discussion was capped with human-centred, inclusive, and evidence-focused protocols, exploring their significant impact on the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in universities.

KEYWORD: AI, Pedagogical, Evidence-Focused Protocols, Human-Centred.

INTRODUCTION

Learning experiences are evaluated, delivered, and designed by institutions in an interesting format, as higher education is being reshaped by a transformative force known as artificial intelligence over the last ten years (Akinwalere& Ivanov, 2022). Newer avenues for student support are on the rise alongside a significant enhancement of academic integrity and adequate streamlining of administrative protocol as artificial intelligence is increasingly adopted by schools across the globe (Crompton & Burke, 2023). A well-known application amongst these is the AI-driven platforms, as they highlight students' preferences, performance, and pace in the development of personalized pathways (Joshi, 2024). They fashion real-time instructions attributable to the learning analytics and machine learning algorithms employed. While this approach improves a learner's long-term progression, mastery, and engagement, this individualized tactic gradually dims the one-size-fits-all traditional higher education system, thus suggesting a paradigm shift (Khelifi&Hamzaoui-Elachachi, 2025).

The delivery and sequencing of educational content are adjusted using insights drawn from a student's interaction patterns, assessment responses, engagement levels, and other data being analyzed and captured continuously by these adaptive learning platforms (Tan, 2025). Say, a student showcases proficiency on a concept, higher-level modes will be activated. If other struggles to grasp the same concept, extra practice materials will be recommended instead. Noteworthy is the attainment of affective and motivational benefits alongside the academic success that this personalization theoretically offers (Ayeni, Ovbiye, Onayemi, &Ojedele, 2024). Thus, as higher education calls for digital transformation and student-focused pedagogies, adaptive platforms significantly help meet the said need.

Many challenge the efficiency of adaptive systems in the university despite its solid theoretical benefits. Countries in Europe and North America with resource-rich and technologically progressive universities are the sources of the case studies or small-scale pilots that dominate the current evidence base (Verdú, Regueras, Verdú, De Castro, & Pérez, 2018). The demographic diversity, duration, and scale of this evidence are limited despite highlighting better course completion rates, test performance, and other positive results. Thus, students in resource-poor institutions, sparingly represented socioeconomic units, and other heterogeneous learning groups are not adequately captured in the studies (Hocine, 2025). More so, 21st-century difficulties are reported to be better navigated with skills like learner autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, and similar higher education outcomes whose inclusiveness in adaptive systems is undetermined due to limited long-term research (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

The worldwide shift in higher-order learning underscores the importance of this gap in research. Pliable lifelong learning is on demand as cross-border mobility, and international participation policies are expanded to allow universities to cater to diverse learners (Kang, Xiong, & Yang, 2024). A smooth transition of an intervention in a setting does not guarantee a similar outcome in another. Students in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, or other multilingual regions might not effectively benefit from applications tailored for learners in English-speaking countries. Some argue that student agency is eroded, and educators' duties are diminished due to the chances of over-automation (Kennedy &Castek, 2025). Others are concerned about transparency, algorithmic bias, and data privacy due to its dependency on voluminous dataset (Chakraborty, 2024).

Justification of Study

Empirical evidence is known to be uneven and limited across the literature. More often than not, universities with adequate advancement in technology host institution-based and small-scale pilots that encompass the evidence base (Saad et al., 2025). Contextually, the results are difficult to generalize despite being mostly positive. Bias is expected as most assessments are sponsored by adaptive systems providers, given the sparseness of peer-reviewed independent studies.

Lifelong learning skills, employability, and sustained learning by adaptive platforms are difficult to quantify due to a lack of longitudinal research, leaving the focus to test scores and other short-term measures (Yaseen et al., 2025). Diverse settings cannot be adequately assessed in terms of the effectiveness of adaptive platforms since Latin America, South Asia, and Africa are not well-represented in existing studies (Imohimi, 2025).

Additionally, there's an absence of systematic measurement of surveillance perception, student well-being, inclusivity, fairness, and other equity-based metrics, as retention, grades, and similar academic outcomes are heavily prioritized (Vesna&Manolkar, 2025). Inadequate attention to these measures limits the authenticity of the enhanced student outcomes these systems claim.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Social equity, pedagogy, and learning have a theoretical and conceptual basis that need to be adequately analysed if artificial intelligence is to be discussed in the context of education. This segment will examine critical views on inclusivity and equity, models and frameworks in AI education, and personalization-focused learning theories as the three pillars.

Traditions known as socio-constructivist and constructivist are some of the major foundations of personalized learning, which hold the centre stage regarding AI in learning (Saleem, Kausar, &Deeba, 2021). An environment and its students have a solid interaction via which knowledge is constantly constructed, and this was highlighted by Piaget’s developmental theory, known as Constructivism (Bada, 2015). The digital world adopted this by ensuring each student’s profile serves as the basis for scaffolding, sequencing, and manipulating content difficulty, thus operationalizing the concepts of constructivism via adaptive learning systems (Owen, 2025).

AI-driven personalization further draws from the principles of the zone of proximal development and the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (McLeod, 2024). Higher competencies are aimed at from students’ initial capabilities through the guidance, streamlined resources, and prompt feedback that adaptive platforms provide (Li, 2025). Hence, we witness at scale, responsive human tutoring and its dynamics being emulated by artificial intelligence.

Behaviorist principles are also underpinned by AI-based personalization. Skinner’s operant conditioning model is used by several AI-driven education systems as a reinforcement learning tactic (Leeder, 2022). As a result, correct answers, prompt engagement, and other desired actions are rewarded. However, creativity and critical thinking will be diminished, and focus will be on task completion if behaviourist traditions are heavily relied upon (Abramson, 2013).

Emotional health, belonging, and motivation alongside cognitive results should be prioritized by personalization as highlighted by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and other humanistic approaches (Rojas, Méndez, & Watkins-Fassler, 2023). While surveillance and privacy are ethical concerns, a holistic outcome is seen with adaptive systems that process written reflections with sentiments, analyse engagement via facial recognition, or use other means of observing affective states (Ballesteros et al., 2024).

The models and framework in AI learning are the next pillar to be discussed, as institutional structures, curriculum, and pedagogy are intertwined with AI technology. Intelligent systems for feedback and assessment, intelligent support for collaborative learning, and intelligent tutoring are the three aspects of AI impact as identified in the “Intelligence Unleashed” framework by R Luckin (Luckin, Holmes, Griffiths, &Forcier, 2016). Institutional decision-making and group engagements are supported alongside personal learning pathways, showcasing AI’s multidimensional role.

There is a 3-level theory that serves as a model for AI in education futures as it combines existing learning theories. Its trajectory spans students (micro-level), institutions (meso-level), and systems (macro-level) (Gibson et al., 2023).Expansive data infrastructures influence policies at the macro-level, workload management and predictive analytics support institutions at the meso-level, and students’ learning is personalized at the micro-level. Thus, university governance is being remodeled by AI rather than being just a classroom apparatus. Nonetheless, data commodification and power bias are some of the issues raised by critics as they suggest the overestimation of AI efficiency and neutrality (Thomas, 2023).

The third pillar is critical views of inclusivity and equity. For AI-based personalization in education, an indispensable concern in theory is equity. Social justice is being underplayed for efficiency by technocentric principles, which are contested by liberation, a concept of education by Freire, and other theories of critical pedagogy (Chalaune, 2021). Outcome, representation, access, and their accompanying disparities could be amplified or reproduced if structural inequality is not prioritized in the development of AI (Farahani&Ghasemi, 2024). Students may encounter inefficiency with these adaptive platforms, as misinterpretation follows datasets without adequate representation of underserved groups.

The universal design for learning (UDL) is also significantly intertwined with inclusivity. Diverse needs are facilitated via accessible and flexible educational avenues as supported by UDL principles (Haji, 2025). Thus, multimodal resources, adaptive pacing text-to-speech, and other methods can be customized to promote inclusivity by AI-mediated personalization. Nonetheless, students with atypical learning pathways could be at a disadvantage if learning for an average student is rigidly calibrated in the name of personalization (Alloghani, Hussain, & Al-Jumeily, 2024).

Participatory design, pedagogical support, and contextually appropriate content should be prioritized alongside easy device access as underpinned by digital equity theories (Nicholson, Bartindale, Kharrufa, Kirk, & Walker-Gleaves, 2022). Engagement could be unknowingly downplayed, and students isolated if cultural contexts or learner voice are not accommodated by these AI-driven platforms.

Adaptive Learning Platforms in Practice

In universities, AI has found a new role, most visible via adaptive learning platforms. Learners' engagement data and performance determine the mode of instruction, the sequence, and the pace, which are all tailored by algorithms. However, indispensable limitations accompany its various achievements in practical application despite the hope of personalization projected theoretically (Tan, Hu, Yeo, & Cheong, 2025). Personalization in higher learning is offered by artificial intelligence using distinct approaches, which adaptive platforms pride themselves on.

Each student and their loads of data points can be analysed to customize learning trajectories for each individual using machine learning. This approach is offered by one of the earliest forerunners, Knewton (Conklin, 2016). Digital textbooks by publishers incorporate this approach, as it heightens proficiency in concepts by employing course sequences. Recommendations by the algorithm could be used to co-develop education trajectories as adaptive tutorials (Kaeophanuek&Chaisriya, 2022). This is emphasized by Pearson's application, initially designed in Australia by Smart Sparrow (Weltman, Hussain, & Marcus, 2017). It adopts a hybrid approach via its teacher-based and algorithm-driven model, giving it a strong foothold in adaptability.

Learners' knowledge state can be mapped via a cognitive diagnostic template as underpinned by ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces) (Harati et al., 2021). Remediation is adequately customized by recognizing mastery of a learner's particular subskills, grounding the model in granular diagnostics. Adaptive problem-solving and cognitive science concepts are interwoven in Carnegie Learning's MATHia (Almoubayyed et al., 2023). More so, extensive audiences on the internet could get customized course recommendations via Coursera's AI-mediated suggestion engines.

Feedback loops, algorithmic adaptation, and data-mediated student modeling are the foundational modes of action of personalization-focused adaptive platforms (Ejjami, 2024).

Interaction sequences, time on task, incorrect/accurate responses, and other performance data are collated constantly using the learner modeling. This provides an overview of the learner's knowledge at any given time.

Instructional sequencing can be modified by these models, and this is known as algorithmic adaptation (Serra & Gilabert, 2021). Say, the original task, quadratic equations, is challenging and thus sidetracked, then the student is rerouted to algebraic concepts. Real-time modification of the model is offered based on learners' responses after acquiring practice opportunities, explanations, and customized hints, and this is known as feedback loops. Noteworthy is the level of openness offered by each adaptive platform. In some systems, algorithmic decisions are modified as learner models can be accessed by instructors, while others present little to no transparency (du Plooy, Casteleijn, &Franzsen, 2024).

Uneven results alongside promising ones are seen with adaptive platforms from various empirical research. In comparison to traditional learning, they are shown to better improve learners' outcomes in meta-analyses. In most subjects, especially mathematics, at-risk learners in US community colleges were reported to have better retention and success rates with ALEKS (Mills, 2021).

The cognitive modeling foundation of Carnegie Learning's MATHia showed positive effects in nurturing problem-solving techniques. Personalized pacing and prompt feedback by AI-driven applications also reportedly boost learners' engagement. As a study on Knewton highlighted, students' learning progressions are better aided, and thus, dropout rates decreased (Nosenko, 2020). Algorithmic modularization is reportedly difficult with discursive and complex courses in non-STEM departments, thus studies of adaptive platforms in these fields yielded uneven results.

The current evidence base for adaptive platforms is argued regardless of the growing influence of university education. Selective reporting and bias are suspected since platform owners co-produced or funded most of the studies published (Verdu et al., 2018). In regions outside the United States, independent assessments are hardly seen. More so, Retention rates, quiz scores, course grades, and other short-term measures are mostly employed in assessing these platforms. Thus, research on equity of access, collaboration, critical reasoning, and other long-term outcomes is deficient.

Additionally, progression could be limited, and stigmatization experienced as system navigation poses a difficulty to learners without adequate digital literacy (Ozor, Dodo, & Bana, 2024). Marginalized groups could be met with surveillance and privacy issues following the dependency of adaptive platforms on a wide student dataset. Some critics believe that the professional autonomy of educators is underplayed as they're positioned as facilitators, thus reflecting a mechanized or impersonal learning (Reeve, 2016). Institutional priorities, culture, and local contexts significantly tailor learning outcomes, contesting the universal applicability posed by adaptive platforms.

Adaptive learning platforms offer non-academic impacts like engagement, autonomy, and motivation (Yaseen et al., 2025). Studies highlight how they facilitate a solid feeling of self-determination and self-involvement. The learning process offers the feeling of ownership by allowing individuals to determine how fast, where, and when to be educated (Hakkal&AitLahcen, 2021). This is more reflected by systems that have learning milestones visualized on the dashboards.

Many platforms use a game-style learning process, and together with prompt feedback, boost motivation in students (Manoharan&Nagulapally, 2024). Difficult and abstract topics could cause disengagement by students; thus, persistence is encouraged via adaptive challenges, badges, and progress indicators. Personalized feedback and consistent engagement by adaptive systems foster more attention and self-confidence than static e-learning modules (Murray & Pérez, 2015). More so, customized activities designed by these platforms require active responses, resulting in fewer incidences of passive learning.

Research on adaptive platforms also yields negative and mixed outcomes. Algorithmic bias, as one of the main concerns, stems from skewed demographics that could be reflected by the dataset this system heavily depends on for learning pathway modeling (Vaida, 2020). Thus, stereotypes are no longer cleared but rather boosted as we experience inaccurate remedial tracks redirection of underrepresented groups. This could lower students' trust and undermine the system's equity claims.

Deep learning could be underplayed in favor of discrete proficiencies due to platforms' pedagogical designs (Yu, 2024). Collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and other transferable skills could suffer as focus is on acing adaptive quizzes. It is a university's central mission to culture the complexity of thoughts and intellectual independence, which might suffer with the use of adaptive platforms (Shephard, 2022). While these systems are said to improve students' autonomy, they might also curtail it. Their learning pathways are determined by the algorithm despite being in charge of the pacing.

Some learners see some activities as basic or irrelevant and get frustrated when directed towards them. Additionally, the platforms could inadvertently have psychological effects on students due to the constant monitoring involved (Čekić, 2024). Their stress levels might increase due to the feeling of surveillance associated with performance dashboards, and continuous data collation, particularly in those with performance anxiety.

A special scrutiny of educational equity in the context of adaptive learning platforms is important. Expensive institutional licenses, up-to-date devices, and reliable networks are essential in accessing AI-based learning applications, thus creating socioeconomic disparities (Jia, 2025). The promises of these platforms may be out of reach for learners with rural or low-income backgrounds. Technological literacy varies, and that will yield unevenness in regions where access is not an issue (Dagunduro et al., 2024).

The universal applicability claimed by adaptive platforms is also eroded by cultural differences. Pedagogical inferences and the English curricula are the basis of these systems since they are primarily created in Europe and North America (Saad et al., 2025). Local educational practices and cultural relevance will be out of place for learners in the global South or the multi-linguals. Local educational needs will be difficult to meet with technologies imported, suggesting digital colonialism alongside the reduction in their overall efficiency (Imohimi, 2025).

Speech-to-text functionalities and dyslexia-friendly features are provided by adaptive platforms to accommodate learners with disabilities (Smith &Hattingh, 2020). Nonetheless, there's a risk of worsening exclusion from inadequate designs since their prioritization of accessibility lacks consistency (Varsik&Vosberg, 2024). Thus, marginalization can occur with the use of adaptive platforms alongside empowerment, resulting in an imbalanced equity landscape.

Limitations of Study

A myriad of limitations and challenges accompany the implementation of AI-driven systems despite their aim to use personalization in revolutionizing higher learning. Policies and practices are modified by ethical concerns, pedagogical issues, as well as technical inadequacies.

Students’ interactions and their top-notch granular data are indispensable for the development of adaptive platforms. However, noise, inconsistency, and incompleteness deter the quality use of this data (Tan et al., 2025). For example, inaccurate recommendations could be given to students by the platform if a cognitive gap is underpinned by a wrong answer rather than the distraction it reflects in reality. More so, hurdles accompany the integration of these platforms in regions with diverse educational systems, resulting in issues with scaling (Dagunduro et al., 2024).

Partial functionality might be the outcome for universities that can’t overhaul infrastructure, as adaptive systems are sometimes difficult to interoperate with learning systems previously in use (Das &Malaviya, 2024). Schools lacking adequate funding might be unable to afford the consistent maintenance and strong cloud architecture needed for the optimum functioning of real-time adaptivity. The technical details will create a gap between universities, finding the smooth integration of adaptive platforms expensive, and those that have the funding, thus worsening the digital divide in the name of personalization (Vesna et al., 2025).

Over-reliance on an adaptive system could yield pedagogical risks even when technical glitches are eradicated. The facilitator's role of teacher is underplayed as the quality of content, sequence, and pacing is dictated by the algorithm, leaving us with over-automation (Vázquez-Cano, 2021). The development of socio-emotional being, critical thinking, creativity, and other complex educational concepts is a hassle despite its success at recognizing knowledge gaps (Oh & Ahn, 2025). Broader learning targets will be undermined in this dynamic as measurable goals are majorly the line of focus.

Collaborative education, reflection, struggle, and other pedagogical values will be sidelined as the platforms aim to achieve mastery via the fastest pathway due to their efficiency optimization (Das & Malaviya, 2024). Furthermore, the feedback from the algorithm, whilst prompt, is reportedly difficult to interpret by some teachers (Olaseni, 2024). This gives rise to the possibility of dismissing its recommendation or relying on it blindly due to a lack of appropriate training sessions. In the long run, machine intelligence and human expertise will not achieve the synergy needed to enhance students’ outcomes.

Equity and ethical issues also accompany adaptive platforms' challenges and limitations. They are developed with data that embodies bias and, as such, can not promise neutrality (Akhtar & Burke, 2023). Students' needs will be wrongly decided and stereotypes reinforced by algorithmic suggestions, as marginalized groups are inadequately represented by the datasets in use. Governance frameworks in use are not clear enough to allow extensive collation of sensitive student information, raising concerns about long-term use of data, ownership, consent, and privacy (Bartneck et al., 2021).

Access to adaptive platforms is uneven, as limited platform availability, outdated devices, and interrupted connectivity are faced by students in low-resource areas (Jia, 2025). A new barrier is inadvertently created within the learning students, as we have learners limited by systemic inequalities, and those in high-income settings with teacher support and constant internet studying adaptively.

Implications and Future Directions

Practice, policy, and research require progressive strategies as highlighted by the limitations and challenges of AI-driven applications discussed above. To move from a niche innovation into a transformative force, adaptive systems need to comprehensively tackle these implications.

The methodology and scope of future studies need to be expanded. Universities' quasi-experimental and small-scale studies shape most of the existing evidence base, and they narrowly focus on grade assessments. Diverse student populations can be accessed for the effectiveness of adaptive systems if under-resourced settings, informal learning, vocational and primary education, and other heterogeneous contexts are tapped into. More so, equity, motivation, learner autonomy, and other long-term goals can be measured alongside short-term impacts if mixed-method designs and longitudinal studies are employed. Traditional pedagogies can be put against adaptive learning in comparative research. This will highlight the instances where and the population to whom genuine value is added by adaptability.

Accountability and equity need to be scaled with innovation by policymakers. Bias needs to be guarded against while explainable requirements are made as the algorithm's suggestions are made transparent. Infrastructure barriers and costs cause the sidelining of certain communities and schools, thus, there is a need for equity-focused funding principles.

Contexts in which data should be exchanged, how it should be saved, and its ownership must be clear to ensure student privacy through data governance policies.

Human instruction should not be substituted with adaptive learning as their interoperation yields a higher level of student outcome. Holistic pedagogy should integrate algorithm recommendations while ensuring their critical interpretation via faculty training. Surveillance perceptions by students could be lessened and agency fostered if the systems' functionalities could be influenced by students' input as a co-development model.

The advantages of human interaction can be intertwined with efficiency if a pathway that combines socio-emotional concepts, project-based and collaborative education, and adaptive learning systems into a hybrid model is introduced. Thus, the responsible use of AI-driven platforms depends on practice, policy, and research ecosystems and not solely on algorithmic complexity if the future of these systems in higher learning is to be envisioned.

Contributions

It is important to assess students' outcomes if we are to significantly appreciate how effective AI-driven adaptive learning platforms are. The impact on equity, motivation, and learning is the major test despite the concentration on institutional adoption and technological innovation (Vaida, 2020). Adaptive platforms have turned out to have both positive and negative academic impacts as well as non-academic impacts. They offer reinforcement, remediation, customized pacing, etc., to enhance students' academic outcomes. High-risk students have been shown to experience strengthened retention rates (Gupta et al., 2020).

Traditional classes have been compared with adaptive learning, especially in the context of courses like mathematics, with the AI-driven applications reportedly yielding better course completion rates in the US community colleges (Murray & Pérez, 2015). This result is in tune with Bloom's taxonomy, which suggests an increased rate of proficiency by learners who have access to sufficient practice and individualized instructions (Adams, 2015). Test outcomes reportedly experience a positive sway with one-time feedback and tailored practice questions by the algorithms, particularly for students learning language, algebra, and statistics, thus bolstering the assimilation of foundational skills.

Noteworthy is how traditional learnings have rigid semester trajectories that force students to progress whether or not competency is achieved (Cuervo& González, 2023). Adaptive platforms prevent this by allowing learners to retake concepts until they have been mastered. This principle benefits learners prepared for acceleration and those needing remediation.

CONCLUSION

The persistent challenges of adaptive learning systems alongside their aim to enhance learners' outcomes and tailor educational pathways have been carefully examined in this article. These AI-driven platforms serve a significant role in higher learning as they improve engagement and academic performance. However, equity concerns, technical barriers, and empirical evidence gaps impact the diverse student settings, resulting in an unfair distribution of these benefits. Thus, there's an indispensable need for an inclusive and evidence-based model for the design and implementation of AI-driven systems if the goals are to be reached.

Privacy, transparency, and equity must be protected by safeguarding policies while the diverse student populations benefit from thorough longitudinal research. Hence, the a call for a careful adoption of AI-driven systems by educators, responsive regulation enactment by policymakers, and deep inquiry by researchers. An inclusive and responsible redesign of higher learning will be the outcome of this collective action.

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