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Digital Transformation and Sustainability in Higher Education

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Chapter 8
Leveraging AI for Nurturing Learners With Empathy, Ethics, and Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents how leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) can create a transformative potential in fostering empathy, ethics, and social responsibility in higher education. It discusses the opportunities brought by AI technologies in enhancing both the emotional intelligence and social-emotional intelligence of learners by providing personalized support and developing empathy. While AI-driven tools offer personalised learning experiences that help in a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, their adoption must be balanced so that technology enhances, not replace human-centric education. Accountability demands that institutions take responsibility for the consequences of the application of AI. Finally, the future of AI in values-based education depends on whether it can complement human educators

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by upgrading learning without compromising any core human element of teaching. Thoughtful and ethical adoption of AI will allow higher education to prepare learners as responsible global citizens in a fast-growing world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Our world is facing complex challenges which impact society's well-being. For example, handling the issues of inequality, climate change, and technological disruption requires humans with not only intellectual capabilities but also high ethical and personal values. Hence, higher education institutions play a significant role in nurturing empathy, ethics, and social responsibility among learners. These values are foundational to creating well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society (Cartabuke et al., 2019; Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; Olt, 2021).

Empathy, ethics, and social responsibility are not just abstract ideals. They are practical tools that enable individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern world with compassion, integrity, and a sense of purpose. For instance, empathy is essential in healthcare professions as it enables practitioners to understand and respond to patients' emotional and physical needs. Empathy is also one of the characteristics of effective leaders and managers. In higher education, many universities embed empathy in medical students in the curriculum through community-based experience. For example, patient-centred care, service learning, and the influence of culture on healthcare delivery are proven to develop doctors who are competent and able to deliver compassionate care to their patients (Magzoub et al., 2024). Other studies also showed that infusing ethos, empathy, and compassion in students through service learning will better prepare students to assume leadership roles in future (Grigoropoulos, 2020).

Technological advancements and global challenges often present ethical dilemmas, and hence, teaching ethics is essential for responsible leadership and innovation. For instance, ethics education helps machine learning students identify and address ethical considerations in projects (Saltz et al., 2019). Additionally, integrating computer ethics components into the curriculum helps students understand the role ethics plays in the computing field and apply ethical decision-making techniques (Kortsarts & Fischbach, 2012). Thus, it is envisaged that computer science students who study ethics are better prepared to address issues like data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the societal impact of artificial intelligence. In another example, ethics education for journalism students plays a critical role in fostering accountable decision-making, resilience, and professionalism in the rapidly evolving digital media landscape (Balčytienė, 2025). The study highlights students' development of higher media

awareness, self-regulatory capacity, and perseverance-directed approaches essential for responsible communication.

Social responsibility is the ability to recognise one's role in contributing to the well-being of society and the planet. Higher education must instil a sense of responsibility in students to address pressing global issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023). For example, responsible management education is crucial for shaping future business leaders who prioritise economic, ethical, environmental, and societal considerations in their decision-making (Homer, Lim, & Poon, 2025). Engaging in social responsibility activities helps students develop a sense of civic duty and personal growth (Coelho & Menezes, 2021), equips students with leadership, teamwork, and ethical decision-making skills (Govindaraj & Pandiyaraj, 2022), helps students understand and appreciate different cultures and ethical perspectives, and promotes empathy and global awareness (Galvão, Mendes, Marques, & Mascarenhas, 2019).

Moreover, higher education is not just about preparing students for careers; it is also about preparing them for leadership and active citizenship. Empathy, ethics, and social responsibility are essential qualities for leaders who can navigate complex societal issues and inspire others to work toward the common good. The inability of higher education institutions to integrate empathy, ethics, and social responsibility into the curriculum risks in producing learners who are morally and socially disconnected.

1.1 Values-Based Education to Nurture Empathy, Ethics and Social Responsibility

Values-based education (VBE) is a philosophical orientation increasingly seen as a crucial building block at the core of institutional transformation in higher education toward empowering empathy, ethics, and social responsibility. The active realization of values, ethics, and moral ideals is an essential aspect of the learning experience flourishing process. Building these necessary characteristics requires educational programs to prioritize value education, develop a mindset of stakeholder empathy, and incorporate appropriate social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies in line with VBE principles.

Value education, for instance, helps the development of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains of learners. It also ensures learners instil empathy, integrity, and social responsibility in addition to academic knowledge. This holistic approach prepares students to act with compassion and moral clarity in their personal and professional lives (Parmar & Jha, 2024). Embedding value education into both formal and informal learning environments will create a culture where ethical principles guide learner's actions and interactions.