Artificial Intelligence in Academic Decision-Making and Students' Recordkeeping: A Case of an ODeL University

Godfrey Tsvuura

Zimbabwe Open University
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0317-0916
Corresponding Author's email: tsvuurag@zou.ac.zw or gtsvuura@gmail.com

Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education is reshaping traditional processes of academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping. This study explores the use of AI in academic decision–making and students' recordkeeping at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). A qualitative research methodology was adopted along with purposive sampling technique in which a sample of 5 heads of sections who deal with students' recordkeeping were chosen as they have knowledge about the problem at hand. Data collected were analysed in thematic strands. Findings underscore that at ZOU, AI is being used to generate educational materials such as study guides, quizzes, automate administrative tasks like students grading as well as in other e-learning platforms such as My Vista, students support services, coursework material preparation and writing by students, data analytics and in widespread research. The study concludes that while AI offers significant opportunities to improve the management of students' recordkeeping and academic decisions, its deployment must be guided by ethical principles, legal compliance, and capacity-building initiatives to maximise benefits and mitigate risks. The study recommends the need for human oversight, inclusive data practices and robust governance frameworks to ensure fairness and accountability in AI-enabled academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, digital environments, machine-learning, records, records management, students' recordkeeping

Introduction

The role of AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping is spreading daily as universities are using AI in both academic and administrative activities. Traditionally, organisations employed human beings to perform organisational tasks using their mental capabilities in decision-making on performance and functions (Ahmad, Han, et al., 2023). Today, in the age of AI, same organisations are adopting technology and using AI to produce large volumes of data and makes decisions used to be done by human beings (Ahmad, et al., 2023). This study explores the use of AI in academic decision–making and students' recordkeeping at ZOU. The adoption and the capabilities of AI are slowly kicking out the human-beings in the production of data and decision-making (Eric, 2019).

AI is rapidly becoming a powerful tool with huge potential to improve academic work, and it is already being used in a variety of ways (Ramadan, 2023). However, AI has come at a time when the inequivalence between computers which are fast and accurate and people who are incredibly slow and inaccurate have caused an unbalanced recordkeeping ecosystem within the information management environments of records offices, libraries and archival institutions around the world (Tsvuura, 2025). Despite this inequivalences, Tsvuura (2025) notes that AI has opened discussions among records professional whether it can support making decisions on the ongoing availability and accessibility of trustworthy of public records in their true digital formats for a long time. Like any other sectors, ZOU has also adopted AI technologies to address modern-day challenges as these technologies have come with vast

advantages that include plagiarism detection, examination integrity, chatbots for enrolment and retention, learning management systems, transcription of faculty lectures, enhanced online discussion boards, analysis of student success metrics and academic boards (Adelbijola et al., 2022; Nakitare and Otike, 2022).

All these AI technologies are at every university's disposal and it's up to universities to take or leave. Ahmad et al., (2023) note that worryingly, institutions across the globe are praising the positive role of AI but ignoring its concerns. In addition, Ahmad et al., (2023) opine that accepting AI without addressing the major human concerns would be like summoning the devils. Stahl (2021) raises AI's ethical issues and concerns as innovation costs, consent issues, personal data misuse, criminal and malicious use, freedom and autonomy loss and the decision-making loss of humans. AI revolution focuses on enhancing benefits and social control, but raises ethical concerns (Ahmad et al., 2023). Accordingly, Rainie et al., (2021) note a clear division regarding AI's positive impact on life and moral standing.

The advent of AI plays a significant role and assists universities in decision-making and students' recordkeeping. According to Ahmad et al., (2023) technology plays an essential role in decision-making and students recordkeeping. Human interactions with AI are increasing day by day (Ahmad et al., 2023) for example various AI applications like robots, chatbots and so on are used in e-learning and education by universities. Today, no one can deny the existence of AI and its importance in the various sectors including higher educational institutions. Tahiru (2021) opines that many AI applications in education include tutoring, educational assistance, feedback, social robots, admission, grading, analytics and virtual reality. The increasing use of AI in higher education is reshaping how students engage with their academic and personal lives (Klimova and Pikhart, 2025). While AI has positively impacted on student academic performance by offering personalised learning, enhancing engagement and providing timely feedback, it also raises concerns regarding digital fatigue, loneliness, technostress and reduced face to face interactions (Klimova and Pikhart, 2025). As students over-rely on AI, there are potential risk issues with data privacy and concerns about academic integrity that need significant considerations. Overreliance on AI may diminish interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, leading to social isolation and anxiety (Klimova and Pikhart, 2025). Ahmad et al., (2023) highlight AI in education as focusing on three contexts which are: 1. the technology itself and its manufacturer; 2. its impact on the lecturer; 3. its impact on the learner or student. Areas of concerns in this regard are the security and privacy of learning outcomes, loss of human decision-making and making students lazy as they can just ask AI to do their academic work like assignment writing. Issues such as data privacy and job displacement emerge as AI technologies permeate educational environments (Klimova and Pikhart, 2025).

Empirical studies have also shown that the integration of AI in the management of students' records has gained attention worldwide. For example, Perifanis and Kitsios (2023) emphasise the irreversible nature of digital transformation and discuss the positive aspects of integrating AI into records management. The authors quickly point out potential threats from digitilisation and the need for integrated approaches to assess problems and take preventive measures. According to Tsabedze (2023) this highlights the importance of considering both benefits and risks associated with AI in the management of records and archives. Wellnhofer (2022) focuses on the real-world and regulatory perspectives of AI in cardiovascular imaging in the medical field. Although her study was specific to the medical field, it also provides insights into the ethical concerns and regulatory approaches applicable in the field of records and archives. Tsabedze (2023) further highlights the need for ethical considerations and

regulatory frameworks when implementing AI in the management of records and archives to ensure the responsible and accountable use of AI technologies.

AI is influencing every task, thereby forcing decision makers, lecturers and other administrative staff lose the power of cognition while making academic or other administrative decisions. This influence and AI capabilities in decision-making is minimising decision-makers in performing various tasks that require human decisions. As a result, decision makers, lecturers and other administrative staff are becoming helpless in the face of AI as the machines can perform many of their functions, thereby losing the skills in decision-making and students' recordkeeping.

This study focuses on the following objectives.

1. to examine the use of AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping
2. to find out the overall perceptions on the use of AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping
3. to determine the future of AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping.

Material and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology along with purposive sampling technique for the primary data collection. A sample size of 5 heads of sections was purposively chosen, because of their knowledge in academic decision-making and students recordkeeping. Qualitative research allows for rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences, beliefs and behaviours (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research was adopted because of its essentiality when studying complex or context-specific phenomena. The researcher systematically predefines a set of procedures to answer the questions as he grouped the questions into themes. He situates findings within real-world settings, enabling a better understanding of the *how* and *why* behind actions or decisions (Patton, 2015). This is particularly useful as the study is exploring social or cultural processes that give trust to academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping. Qualitative methods offer adaptive data collection, allowing researchers to respond to emerging themes during the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This iterative approach is beneficial as the researcher values participants' perspectives and voices, aligning with interpretivist paradigms that seek meaning over measurement (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The theory of human-in-the-loop is evolving and requires qualitative methods to generate new conceptual frameworks and understanding on whether AI can be trusted in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping. The findings emerged from an in-depth qualitative analysis of participants' responses concerning the use of AI in academic decision-making and student recordkeeping. Through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires, rich and nuanced insights were gathered from participants, allowing for a contextualised understanding of how AI technologies are being integrated into academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping. The themes identified reflect both the opportunities and challenges posed by AI, capturing participant perceptions on efficiency, fairness, ethical concerns and the evolving role of human judgment. The analysis follows a thematic approach, highlighting recurring patterns and divergent viewpoints that provide a comprehensive narrative on the lived experiences and institutional realities surrounding AI implementation in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping.

Results

The results of the study were grouped according to the themes that emerged during interviews with the participants.

Use of AI in Academic Decision Making and Students Recordkeeping

The participants were asked to explain how they use AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping at ZOU. This is in view that AI is increasingly being used in academic institutions for data-driven decision-making, particularly in admissions, curriculum planning and student performance monitoring. Institutions leverage predictive analytics and machine learning to identify at-risk students, automate applicant screening and tailor educational interventions (Lu et al., 2018). The participants highlighted that they have adopted AI for various activities at the institution as they make academic decisions in their different units since they all deal with students' records management from application, admissions, processing and migrating coursework from MyVista to the Academic Registry Information System (ARIS).

One of the participants indicated that,

"… at ZOU, AI is being used to generate educational materials such as study guides, quizzes, automate administrative tasks like students grading as well as in other e-learning platforms such as MyVista, students support services, coursework material preparation and writing by students, data analytics and in widespread research".

The responses by the participants are in line with observations by Ifenthaler and Yau, (2020) who opine that the use of AI is widespread as some universities employ AI algorithms to predict student dropout risks by analysing attendance, grades and behavioural patterns. Another participant highlighted that,

"… we use *AI systems to improve consistency and reduce human bias, however, our concerns remain about algorithmic bias, lack of transparency and potential unfairness in decision-making".*

Studies have also show that AI systems can inherit biases from training data, leading to unfair outcomes for marginalised groups (Holstein et al., 2019). However, ensuring fairness requires constant auditing, inclusive datasets and transparency in algorithm design.

The participants were further asked to describe any AI tools or systems used to support decisions such as student admissions, course placement or academic performance monitoring.

According to Kose et al., (2020) AI-powered decision support systems (DSS) such as IBM Watson Education and Coursera's course recommendation engines use natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning to personalise learning and assist educators in course placements. Predictive analytics tools like Civitas Learning or Salesforce Education Cloud are employed to assess student engagement and help inform advising and support services (Kose et al., 2020). The participants said that they use various tools that are integrated into the learning management system to perform tasks required in admission of students and management of students records as they enrol with the university. One of the participants mentioned,

"*…systems such as admission management systems, course placement algorithms and the learning management system (MyVista) are systems being used to undertake academic decision making and students recordkeeping. The ARIS is the main system responsible for keeping students records and tracking their progress until they complete studies The importance of AI in students' recordkeeping include efficiency in processing and retrieving records, accuracy by minimising human error, analytics capabilities through predictive modelling and personalised learning pathways by integrating data across platforms."*

Another participant had this to say,
"*…In all students' records management, from the period students search for programme admission requirements to the issuance of degree we are being assisted by AI to collect data, analyse it and then respond to students' needs."*

However, Ahmad et al., (2023) note that while using an intelligent system, applicants may submit their records directly to the designer and get approval for admission tests without human scrutiny. The author argue that the reasons are two folds: the authorities trusting the system and laziness created by task automation among the leaders. Similarly, in keeping the records of students and analysing their data, again, the choice will be independent on the decision made by the system. The participants also highlighted risks associated with AI- based student record systems such as data breaches and violations, over-surveillance of students and loss of control over the data. In addition, Williamson & Piattoeva, (2021) note that misuse of predictive analytics can label students unfairly, impacting their educational trajectory.

Perceptions of the Accuracy and Fairness of AI in Making Academic Decisions
The participants were asked on how they perceive the accuracy and fairness of AI in making academic decisions. They expressed mixed perceptions regarding the accuracy and fairness of AI in academic decision-making. Others viewed AI as a powerful tool capable of processing vast datasets with high computational accuracy, minimising human error in areas such as admissions filtering, performance predictions and academic advising, while others emphasised that AI systems can identify patterns and correlations in student data that might otherwise go unnoticed by human evaluators. However, concerns about fairness were prominent across the interviewees. They highlighted the risk of algorithmic bias**,** where historical inequalities embedded in training data could be replicated or even amplified by AI systems. One participant said that,
"*… this raises ethical concerns, particularly when AI is used in high-stakes decisions like admissions or academic processes. There is lack of transparency on how AI systems reach conclusions, leading to scepticism about fairness and accountability."*

These findings align with Holstein et al., (2019) and Binns, (2018) who emphasise that while AI can enhance decision-making, its fairness is contingent upon ethical design, data diversity and human oversight. The participants stressed the importance of maintaining human judgment alongside AI to ensure contextual understanding, empathy and individualised consideration in academic decisions.

Challenges or Concerns related to AI-Assisted Decision-Making
The participants were further asked about the challenges they face in AI- assisted decision-making. This was in line with the major concerns identified by Binns, (2018) that include algorithmic bias, opaque decision logic ("black box" problem), overreliance on AI outputs by decision-makers and lack of regulatory standards. For instance, AI recommendations in admissions may reinforce historical inequalities if data used for training reflect existing biases (Zliobaite, 2017). The participants reported that the integration of AI into academic decision-making processes presents several significant benefits, challenges and concerns. One of the most cited concerns by the participants was the potential for algorithmic bias. They noted that if AI systems are trained on historical data that reflect existing inequalities, such as gender, racial or socioeconomic disparities, the resulting decisions may reinforce systemic discrimination rather than eliminating the challenges. For instance, AI tools used in admissions may disadvantage applicants from underrepresented backgrounds due to biased training datasets (Zliobaite, 2017; Binns, 2018). The participants further raised concerns about the

"black box" nature of AI systems. One participant alluded that "… AI models, especially deep learning algorithms, offer little to no insight into how they reach conclusions". Holstein et al., (2019) argue that this opacity undermines trust and makes it difficult for lecturers and administrators to justify decisions or respond to student appeals.

The participants also raised a concern of a growing fear of automation bias, where lecturers or decision-makers may overly trust AI outputs without sufficient critical evaluation. One participant said that,
this could lead to a passive acceptance of flawed recommendations, particularly in resource-constrained environments where staff may not have the expertise or time to scrutinise AI decisions.

Goddard et al., (2022) also indicated that AI systems rely heavily on data quality. The participants further expressed concerns that academic records may not always capture the full context of a student's performance, such as personal circumstances, learning disabilities or cultural factors. One participant highlighted, *"... this results in AI models that can make technically accurate but contextually insensitive decisions"*. The participants were further asked about how they apply policies and ethics when making AI decisions. The participants said that the major concerns are lack of ethical and legal considerations such as seeking informed consent and issues of student data privacy. UNESCO (2021) opine that many institutions lack clear policies or frameworks governing the use of AI, raising questions about accountability and compliance with data protection laws. The other challenge raised by the participants was that of resistance by lecturers and administrators to adopt AI tools due to a lack of training, digital literacy or trust in technology. They emphasised the need for capacity-building and interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure successful implementation and ethical oversight of AI in academic decision-making and students' recordkeeping.

Future use of AI in academic decision making and students' recordkeeping
The participants were further asked about the future use of AI in academic decision making and students recordkeeping. This was in view that AI should support and not replace human roles in academic decision making and students' recordkeeping. They highlighted that there will be advanced use of AI as technology is advancing beyond human imagination. This view is in line with the predictions of researchers in AI who expect the role of AI in higher education to grow, but in a supporting rather than substituting capacity. Zawacki-Richter et al., (2019) argue that in academic decision-making, future AI systems are projected to move beyond descriptive analytics toward predictive and prescriptive models that can simulate outcomes of policy changes, flag at-risk students in real time and recommend tailored interventions. Accordingly, these tools will likely become more explainable and enabling faculty and administrators to interrogate algorithmic reasoning and make ethically informed choices (Holstein et al., 2019). One participant said, *"the future will be bright if AI can integrate lifetime learner recordkeeping so that former students can request their past records when need arise".* In support, Ifenthaler and Yau (2020) predict that enhanced natural-language and computer-vision tools may automate routine record classification, verification and anomaly detection while strengthening data integrity and audit trails. At the same time, UNESCO (2021) stresses that ethical and governance frameworks must evolve alongside these technologies. "Future AI deployments should embed privacy-by-design, inclusive training datasets and clear lines of accountability to prevent discrimination, misuse of data or over-surveillance" (UNESCO, 2021). One participant emphasised,

there is need for continuous capacity-building and training of staff to understand and critically evaluate AI outputs as this helps to realise the benefits without eroding trust or human judgment.

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight how AI is being used in academic decision making and students recordkeeping at the ZOU. However, Ahmad et al., (2023) argue that when the usage and dependency of AI increase, this will automatically limit the human brain's thinking capacity and as a result decrease the thinking capacity of humans. This moves intelligence capacities from humans and makes them artificial (Ahmad et al., 2023). Even though there is an uptake in the use of AI, Mhlanga (2021) opines that AI still needs data and uses it for learning patterns and decision-making. "AI will slowly and gradually starve the human brain of thoughtfulness and mental efforts as it gets deep into each activity, like planning and organising" (Ahmad et al., 2023). High-level reliance on AI may degrade professional skills and generate stress when physical or brain measures are needed (Gocen and Aydemir, 2020). AI is minimising human autonomous role, replacing human choices with its choices and making humans lazy in various walks of life (Ahmad et al., 2023). Eric (2019) further notes that AI undermines human autonomy and responsibilities, leading to a knockout effect on happiness and fulfilment. This impact will not remain on a specific group of people or area but will also encompass the education sector (Ahmad et al., 2023). Getting an addiction to AI use will lead to laziness and a problematic situation in the future (Ahmad et al., 2023). As humans think they are getting benefits and saving time by using AI in their decision-making (Ahmad et al., 2023), Jarrahi (2018) argues that AI is overcoming the human biological processors through lowing cognition capabilities.

The participants highlighted the benefits and challenges they are deriving from the use of AI in academic decision making and students' recordkeeping. Although AI technologies and applications have many benefits, Ahmad et al., (2023) further argue that such technologies have severe negative consequences such as limiting human role in decision-making. Ahmad et al., (2023) argue that slowly and gradually, AI limits and replaces the human role in decision-making. The participants predicted a future advanced use of AI in academic decision making and students recordkeeping. Ghosh et al., (2019) opine that in future, the human mental capabilities like intuitive analysis, critical thinking and creative problem solving will be getting out of decision-making. As a result, the human decision-making capabilities will be defeated in the battlefield of human versus machine warfare. This means that AI will dominate academic decision making and students' recordkeeping. Meisner and Keding (2021) argue that although AI is helping the decision-making process, humans still need to have the last say in the decision-making. However, some organisations are playing it safe by adopting hybrid models of human-machine collaboration approach (Ahmad et al., 2023). In all these discussions, Tran (2021) finds it necessary to ask simple but essential questions: "Does AI make ethical choices? Or does AI impact human decision-making capabilities?" The participants further acknowledge that training and capacity building are critical in the future use of AI in academic decision making and students recordkeeping.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is a widespread use of AI in academic decision making and students' recordkeeping. While the use of AI holds promises for improving efficiency and objectivity in academic decision-making, significant challenges have also been noted and these include algorithm bias, lack of transparency and ethical issues. AI can significantly affect the academic decision-making process and students' recordkeeping practices as its negative impact

can lead to loss of human control in decision-making and promote laziness in using cognitive and intuition capabilities. Although institutions can enjoy the advantages and benefits of AI technologies, the negative concerns about loss of academic decision-making, laziness, privacy and ethical issues, security and loss of control in students' recordkeeping practices in not to be ignored.

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