

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Navigating generative AI in higher education: A framework for educator decision-making

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The rapid emergence of generative AI (GenAI) in higher education offers transformative opportunities but also significant pedagogical and ethical challenges. Unlike coordinated institutional responses to COVID-19, GenAI adoption has been slower and more fragmented, often relying on individual educators navigating an ambiguous institutional landscape without clear guidance. This preliminary qualitative study introduces a five-stage decision-making framework, developed from a thematic literature review and interviews with early GenAI adopters across all six faculties at a large research-intensive university. The framework foregrounds reflective practice, ethical considerations, educator identity, and AI literacy as key factors shaping context-sensitive decisions about GenAI integration. Preliminary findings highlight the critical influence of institutional culture and leadership on educator practice. They also underscore the need for explicit institutional ethics frameworks that address data privacy, algorithmic bias, and pedagogical integrity. The model offers a practical, staged approach to support thoughtful decision-making, with broader applicability for informing institutional policy and guiding faculty-level strategy in this evolving context.

Keywords: generative AI, academic decision-making, digital capability, higher education, AI ethics, qualitative research, institutional culture

Introduction

Generative AI (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot and Claude are rapidly reshaping higher education, enabling personalised learning, assessment innovation and pedagogical transformation (Lee et al., 2024; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). However, this shift also raises urgent concerns about academic integrity, ethical use, equitable access and pedagogical appropriateness (Selwyn, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023). Unlike the swift, coordinated pivots during the COVID-19 pandemic, responses to GenAI have been slower and inconsistent. Despite its potential to disrupt assessment, authorship and instructional design, GenAI adoption is often left to individual educators amid institutional uncertainty (Fowler et al., 2023; TEQSA, 2024). This disparity prompts critical examination of why universities have not matched pandemic-era urgency for GenAI, revealing institutional, ethical and professional challenges shaping educator decisions.

While foundational models such as Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations and Mishra and Koehler's (2006) Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPaCK) offer useful perspectives on technology adoption, they do not fully address the iterative, ethically complex and context-sensitive realities of GenAI integration (Ghimire & Edwards, 2024; Mishra et al., 2023). This study, part of a Master of Education thesis with data collection in 2025–2026, examines how early GenAI adopters at a large research-intensive university navigate these decisions. Drawing on reflective practice (Schön, 1983), critical AI perspectives (Selwyn, 2024) and AI literacy (Luckin et al., 2016), the study proposes a five-stage decision-making framework capturing the dynamic, situated nature of GenAI integration.

Conceptual Framework

Five complementary conceptual lenses underpin the framework, each informing specific stages of GenAI decision-making (see Table 1).

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Table 1
Conceptual Lenses and Framework Stages

Conceptual Lens	Key Contribution	Most Relevant Framework Stage(s)
Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003)	Explains how awareness, peer influence, and social networks drive early adoption behaviours.	1. Awareness & Exposure 2. Initial Sense-Making
Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPaCK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006)	Frames the integration of GenAI as requiring the alignment of technology, pedagogy, and disciplinary content.	2. Initial Sense-Making 3. Evaluation & Feasibility 4. Design & Implementation
Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983)	Highlights the cyclical, evaluative process of integrating and revising GenAI use through reflection.	4. Design & Implementation 5. Reflection & Adaptation
Critical AI Perspectives (Perkins et al., 2024; Susnjak & McIntosh, 2024)	Emphasises ethical interrogation, equity, and integrity in GenAI adoption.	3. Evaluation & Feasibility 4. Design & Implementation
AI Literacy (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Matthews & Volpe, 2023)	Frames the technical understanding and ethical awareness needed for confident, responsible GenAI use.	1. Awareness & Exposure 3. Evaluation & Feasibility 4. Design & Implementation

The five-stage decision-making framework is as follows:

1. Awareness & Exposure: Initial encounters and impressions of GenAI.
2. Initial Sense-Making: Exploring GenAI’s educational relevance.
3. Evaluation & Feasibility: Assessing pedagogical fit, ethics, policy, and readiness.
4. Design & Implementation: Planning and executing GenAI-integrated activities.
5. Reflection & Adaptation: Ongoing evaluation and refinement.

Progression through these stages is shaped by institutional context, educator identity, perceived risks and digital capability.

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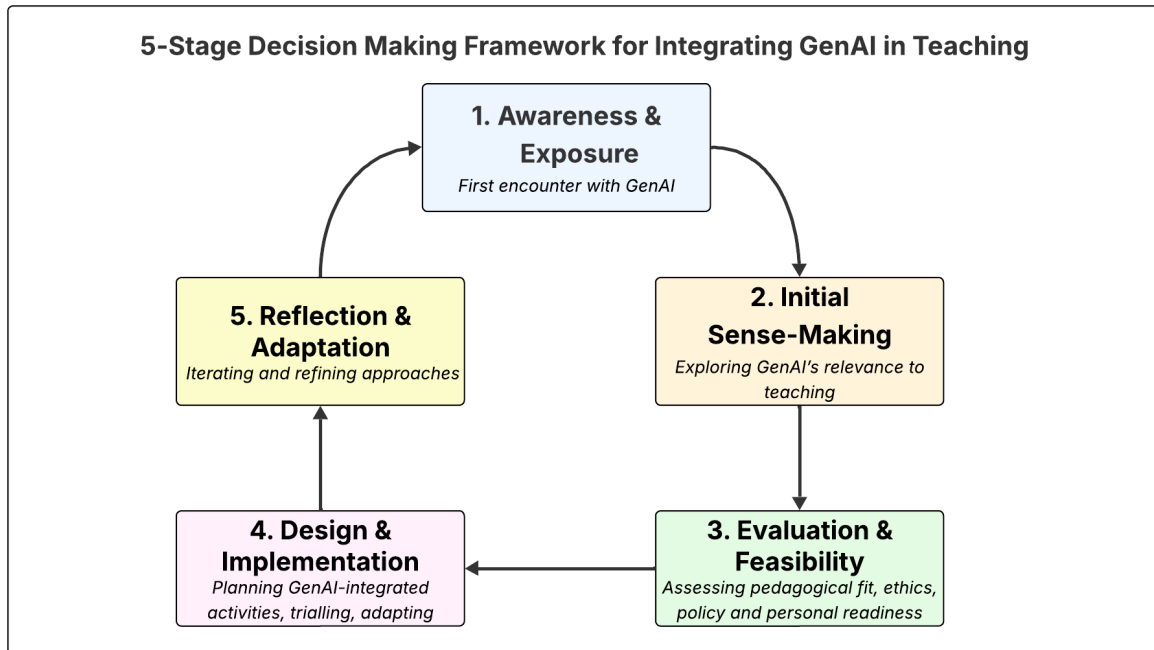


Figure 1. Five-Stage Decision-Making Framework for GenAI Integration

Research Design and Methods

This preliminary qualitative study uses an interpretive, abductive approach, where emerging interview themes are iteratively interpreted through multiple conceptual lenses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study utilises an abductive approach, whereby emerging themes from interview data are iteratively interpreted through multiple conceptual lenses. This analytic process both informs and is shaped by the ongoing development of the five-stage decision-making framework, which remains provisional as analysis progresses. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diverse disciplinary representation, specifically targeting early adopters across all six faculties at a large research-intensive university. This strategy enables the study to capture a broad range of pedagogical orientations, institutional contexts, and disciplinary norms that influence educator decision-making regarding GenAI integration.

Following institutional ethics approval, ten semi-structured interviews are being conducted, each averaging approximately 60 minutes. The interview protocol explores educators' decision-making processes across the framework's stages, from initial encounters to ethical concerns and pedagogical experimentation. To elicit deeper insight into decision-making across the framework's stages, participants are also asked to discuss teaching scenarios involving GenAI, prompting reflection on potential responses and underlying rationales. The interview guide is informed by emerging literature on GenAI use in higher education (Fowler et al., 2023; Matthews & Volpe, 2023), and data collection is ongoing.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) guides the interpretive coding process, recognising the active role of the researcher in generating and refining themes in relation to the five-stage decision-making framework. Reflexivity is embedded throughout the research process via reflective journaling, analytic memos, and participant member-checking, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Shenton, 2004).

Emerging Insights

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Preliminary analysis of interviews with early-adopter educators has surfaced several influential themes shaping decision-making around GenAI integration.

The Influence of Institutional Context

A recurring theme was the profound impact of institutional culture and leadership, or the lack thereof, on educators' decision-making. The absence of a clear, university-wide vision for GenAI has created a vacuum, leaving many feeling isolated and solely responsible for navigating this complex technology. One participant described the challenge of discerning "what is a fad, and what is actually something that's going to be worth investing a lot of time in," a decision made more difficult by the lack of institutional direction. Consequently, innovation is often driven from the bottom up by proactive individuals or departments rather than a coordinated strategy. Another interviewee noted that decision-making remains at a "personal level" and questioned how the process could be scaled from the "micro-level to meso to macro."

Ethical Considerations for Institutional Adoption

Ethical considerations for GenAI demand a robust institutional framework that extends beyond individual academic integrity. The interviews conducted for this study reveal a pressing need for such a framework. Educators expressed concerns regarding the university's rapid expansion of enterprise-supported AI tools, which complicates advising students on matters of data privacy and appropriate use. Furthermore, an institutional approach to ethics must address the pedagogical risks of what has been termed "improper cognitive offloading", ensuring that the adoption of AI does not undermine the development of foundational knowledge and critical evaluative judgment. One participant voiced a pervasive cynicism, suggesting that institutional motivations can be perceived as being driven more by a technological "bubble" than by pedagogical principles. Therefore, an effective institutional ethics framework must be transparent, pedagogically grounded, and developed in consultation with the academic community to build trust and guide the responsible integration of these powerful technologies.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The preliminary framework and findings provide practical, specific guidance for educators and institutional leaders:

- Clear guidelines: Develop explicit, stage-aligned policies addressing ethics and pedagogy (TEQSA, 2024).
- Targeted professional development: Provide continuous, stage-aligned professional learning tailored to educators' needs, enhancing AI literacy and pedagogical competence (Luckin et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2023).
- Supportive leadership: Create spaces for open dialogue and an inclusive, reflective culture that acknowledges GenAI's complexities and the realities of the institution's teaching and learning environment (Cowling et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024).
- Equitable support strategies: Tailor resources and mentoring to accommodate varying readiness levels and digital capabilities among educators (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; TEQSA, 2024).
- Environmental and data privacy considerations: Address emerging concerns around the environmental impact and data privacy associated with GenAI adoption.
- Managing change fatigue: Recognise and mitigate change fatigue by pacing expectations, providing protected time for professional learning and supporting educator wellbeing.

Recent policy reports (APRU, 2025; Francis et al., 2025) reinforce the need for robust, adaptable frameworks to support educators' critical decision-making about when, why, and how to integrate generative AI into teaching practice in ethically sound and pedagogically effective ways. While this study contributes to that broader call, the recommendations here are specifically designed for the institutional context under study and may not be directly transferable.

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Conclusion

This preliminary qualitative study presents a comprehensive, evidence-informed framework that elucidates how educators make decisions about integrating GenAI into their teaching. By conceptualising the process in five iterative stages and foregrounding the influence of institutional context, the framework captures the complex, non-linear, and reflective nature of GenAI engagement. The findings reinforce the necessity of providing clear policies, robust professional development, and supportive environments to empower educators.

Looking forward, the framework has broad applicability. It is designed to be scalable, moving from individual practice to departmental strategy ('micro to meso'). It can also inform institutional policy by identifying where educators need resources, such as on data privacy, and guide disciplinary innovation by adapting to diverse pedagogical contexts. This research positions educator agency and reflection as central to effective GenAI adoption, and future work will refine the model as analysis progresses.

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