


# Chapter 9

## Generative AI Ethics in Open Distance Learning: A Theory of Moral Development Approach

**Paul Othusitse Dipitso**

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8351-6971>

*Postgraduate Research and Development Office, University of the Witwatersrand,  
South Africa*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education continues to influence teaching and learning. The sustained adoption of generative AI in universities demonstrates the value of enhancing learning by using AI applications. Although these technological developments have revolutionised learning they have resulted in some ethical and moral implications that threaten academic integrity. The chapter examines generative AI ethics in open distance learning from a moral development perspective. The content analysis revealed the need for open distance learning to promote ethical practices concerning the use of generative AI to enhance academic integrity and justice. The chapter concludes by recognising that the ethical challenges and dilemmas of generative AI can be addressed by intentional policy making and raising awareness on ethical practices related to AI. It recommends that universities should capacitate both students and educators on generative AI ethics and develop critical generative AI literacies to empower students to grapple with complex AI issues.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) has proliferated research in higher education and has become vital in shaping policy and practice. Globally, universities are increasingly adopting strategies and policies to align their functional operations with artificial intelligence (Popenici & Kerr, 2017). The quality of education is dependent upon academic integrity. Academic integrity is characterised by honesty, trust, and ethical conduct. These AI solutions can drastically change university administrative systems and services thus, the digital age transformations pose significant challenges that affect teaching and learning and ultimately academic integrity. In light of these developments, it is apparent that AI driven contributions play a key role, whereby generative AI is recognised as a critical element in the learning process. The proliferation of AI has brought complexities and ethical concerns within the higher education landscape (Balalle & 2025, Pannilage). Notably, the impact of AI on open distance education is underpinned by multiple ethical issues affecting academic integrity.

Universities face enormous pressure to monitor and regulate the proliferated use of AI for academic purposes. Previous studies have shown that this growing trend has led to a heightened interest in ethics in generative AI in higher education (Maphoto et al, 2024; Williams, 2024). Anderson and Anderson (2021) assert that ethics is concerned with determining which action or policy would be best given a particular set of circumstances that involve human agency and choice. The fundamental ethical issues often arise from contemplating using AI and the choice of which tool to use. Ethical decision-making has become a responsibility for learners, given that digital technologies have transformed the learning space. Ethical considerations are crucial to determine if specific generative tools should be adopted and assess the implications for utilising these tools (Cherner, Foulger & Donnelly, 2024). Arguably, higher education plays a critical role in cultivating thought and action against oppressive systems and considering ethical dimensions of generative AI can be valuable toward demanding justice (Wilkes, 2024). However, there are inadequate or comprehensive guidelines on how to use generative AI in open distance learning institutions in Africa.

In this chapter, Kohlberg's theory of moral development provided a theoretical lens for understanding generative AI tool ethics in open distance learning. Essentially, moral judgement is a crucial element that guides ethical behavior, which enables individuals to make rational and just decisions. In most cases, open distance learners are adults who can navigate the complexities of making ethical judgements. For instance, critical debates have emerged from questioning whether generative AI could be cited as a co-author, and this poses challenges to ethical academic practices. The application of ethical principles strengthens academic integrity and

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