LEADING THROUGH TRANSFORMATION: UNIVERSITY RESPONSES TO GENERATIVE AI IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The widespread availability of generative artificial intelligence since late 2022 has prompted higher education institutions worldwide to reconsider AI integration into teaching, research, and administration while preserving academic traditions. This study examines how university leaders at seven of Romania's leading AI-focused institutions navigate this challenge within the European regulatory context – a national perspective underrepresented in existing scholarship. Through semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, we explore support structures for AI adoption, balancing innovation with human-centered pedagogy, and future competencies needed in AI-influenced environments. Drawing on boundary-work theory, we analyse how leaders define institutional boundaries around appropriate AI use, stakeholder interests, and competing values. Findings reveal that leaders function as active mediators operating at institutional, pedagogical, and epistemic levels, negotiating AI integration through boundary-work rather than passively accepting technological change. The study contributes to scholarship on institutional governance and strategic responses to AI by foregrounding leadership perspectives, an underexplored but critical dimension of AI integration.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, higher education leadership, AI integration, university governance, boundary work, European higher education, Romania

1. Introduction

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly ChatGPT, has prompted universities to reconsider long-standing *modus operandi*. Initially, many institutions, mirroring debates in society, responded with caution and attempted to implement restrictions or outright bans to address concerns about academic integrity, unauthorized use or even the tradition of human-produced knowledge (McDonald et al., 2024; An et al., 2025; Sejdiu & Sejdiu, 2025; Vannozzi, 2026). Over time, however, universities have shifted towards a more proactive approach, developing policies and guidance that encourage responsible and productive integration of AI into teaching and learning (Bearman et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2024). A UNESCO survey of 400 higher education professionals from 90 countries found that nine in ten respondents reported using AI tools in their work, yet over half expressed uncertainty about effective pedagogical or research applications (UNESCO, 2024). For European universities, the European University Association (EUA) has emphasized that AI integration must preserve human control (the so-called “human-in-the-loop” approach) and university values, while complying with regulatory frameworks (EUA, 2024; Stewart et al., 2026), including the EU Artificial Intelligence Act (scheduled for implementation in 2028). European institutions also vary considerably in their technological infrastructure,

institutional readiness, and cultural approaches to digital transformation, with research indicating persistent disparities in AI adoption across EU countries (Verboom et al., 2025). Scientific literature and institutional reports from UNESCO, EUA and EU offer valuable insights into institutional trends and struggles. Scholars have less thoroughly examined how university leaders themselves perceive and navigate the challenges triggered by the AI presence, sophistication and penetration in societal fabric. Exploring their perspective is, in our view, critical for understanding the strategies and reasoning behind current approaches to AI in higher education.

While these international and European-level studies provide valuable macro-level insights, understanding how AI integration unfolds requires examining specific national contexts. Romania, as a mid-sized EU member, received relatively little scholarly attention compared to its Western counterparts, despite its universities facing similar pressures to integrate AI into operations, while navigating the same European regulatory frameworks. This study embarks, therefore, on the intellectual journey of examining how Romanian university leaders at major universities envisage AI integration. Drawing on boundary work theory (Gieryn, 1983; Langley et al., 2019), we recognize that leaders are engaged in defining boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI, between different stakeholder interests and between competing institutional values. As those with authority to influence these boundaries through policymaking and resource allocation, their perspectives matter for understanding institutional responses to AI. Through semi-structured interviews, the research explores three dimensions of AI integration that leaders are navigating: support structures, balancing innovation and pedagogy, and future competences, enabling the academic community to remain relevant in an AI-influenced environment. These three dimensions reflect tensions that institutions must address. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on institutional governance and strategic responses to AI in higher education. It offers insights into how university leaders conceptualize AI-related challenges and what strategies they are implementing or considering.

2. Literature review

The fast-paced integration of artificial intelligence into higher education presents university leaders with unprecedented strategic challenges. As AI capabilities advance, institutional leaders must navigate tensions between innovation and academic integrity, efficiency and pedagogical quality, and adoption and equity. How leaders conceptualize these challenges and formulate responses shapes the policies, institutional infrastructures, and institutional cultures that ultimately determine whether AI integration enhances or undermines educational quality. Analysis of first policy responses from 30 leading universities globally reveals that institutions are grappling with accountability mechanisms, human oversight, transparency, and academic integrity (Dabis & Csaki, 2024), yet institutional approaches remain highly variable. Research applying boundary work theory to policies from 16 universities and 12 publishers demonstrates diverse strategies for legitimizing AI integration while maintaining traditional academic values (Rughiniș et al., 2025). The EU regulatory environment, particularly the forthcoming AI Act, positions universities as central actors in achieving AI ambitions while maintaining rights-based approaches to innovation (van den Berg & Papadopoulos, 2024), creating both opportunities and constraints for institutional leaders developing AI strategies.

Despite growing attention to institutional AI policies, qualitative research examining leadership perspectives remains limited. A case study with 18 graduate students in educational leadership who conducted stakeholder interviews identified legal and ethical use, personalized learning, curriculum innovation, and policy development as central concerns (Stewart et al., 2026). International research has identified distinct faculty profiles: optimists, moderates, dreamers, and cautious skeptics. The findings suggest that leadership must address heterogeneous perspectives within academic communities (Verboom et al., 2025). A comprehensive policy framework for university teaching and learning proposes that effective AI integration requires coordinated attention to detection, guidelines, support, evaluation, and communication dimensions (Chan, 2023). However, these studies focus primarily on faculty or student experiences rather than on how institutional leaders themselves conceptualize AI integration challenges and formulate strategic responses.

Understanding leadership perspectives requires examining the infrastructure leaders must build to support AI incorporation. Effective faculty development programs represent a critical yet underdeveloped dimension of institutional AI strategy. Research involving 122 faculty members identified lack of AI literacy among both students and faculty as a primary challenge, with most expressing interest in professional development (Barus et al., 2025). Yet institutional responses remain inconsistent, with inadequate training constituting a significant obstacle that manifests not only as open opposition but also as passive non-use or avoidance of AI capabilities (Buele & Llerena-Aguirre, 2025). AI literacy has evolved from narrow technical competence to encompass multidimensional capabilities including critical understanding of foundations, potential, limitations, risks, and ethical frameworks (Onicioiu & Bularca, 2025). The Digital Education Council defines AI literacy as the ability to use AI tools effectively and ethically, evaluate outputs, ensure humans remain central, and adapt to changing AI landscapes in professional settings (Kelley & Wenzel, 2025). A mixed-methods study involving 538 faculty members identified community support as the most influential factor in AI literacy development, followed by professional development opportunities and continuous learning applications (Abedalkarim M. Ayyoub et al., 2025), while research examining 1,103 university teachers found that digital competence positively correlates with AI literacy (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025). These findings underscore that support structures must be systematic, sustained, and integrated with broader professional development initiatives.

An ethical digital divide emerges when only faculty with strong technological backgrounds possess competencies to critically assess AI systems, while others become excluded from decision-making and pedagogical innovation (Onicioiu & Bularca, 2025). Research examining faculty AI adoption across 45 higher education institutions reveals distinct user profiles based on self-efficacy and usage patterns, with professional development needs varying significantly across these groups (Mah & Groß, 2024). This inequality represents a form of professional exclusion that institutional training initiatives must actively address, yet what remains unclear is how institutional leaders perceive these challenges and what strategies they employ to bridge these divides.

Even well-designed support structures cannot resolve fundamental tensions inherent in AI integration. A central challenge concerns maintaining appropriate balance between technological efficiency and pedagogical practices centered on human interaction. Effective teaching relies on emotional intelligence, empathy, and

relationship-building, with human interactions creating trust and psychological safety that enable deeper learning experiences (Zhang et al., 2025). Yet AI promises substantial efficiency gains and personalization capabilities that traditional approaches struggle to provide. Frameworks for balanced assessment propose combining foundational skill-building with ethically guided human-AI co-production, distinguishing between tasks where human interaction adds significant value, time-intensive tasks where AI can increase capacity for human engagement, and tasks where efficiency matters more than human presence. Research on student well-being indicates that while AI enhances digital communication efficiency, excessive reliance can reduce face-to-face interactions, impairing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Cyber-social teaching approaches that combine digital tools with social learning strategies offer potential pathways, though they also present limitations including technological dependence, risks of surface learning, and challenges in assessment integrity (Liu et al., 2025). These systemic concerns underscore that individual institutional decisions about balance aggregate to shape broader questions of academic quality and credential value.

Effective academic leadership in AI integration requires competencies extending beyond technical proficiency to encompass strategic vision, ethical reasoning, and adaptive capacity. For higher education leaders, AI literacy involves qualitatively different demands than K-12 contexts, including aligning AI use with disciplinary epistemologies, balancing efficiency with integrity, and adapting teaching for new generations of learners. The AI Literacy Heptagon framework proposes seven dimensions: technical, applicational, critical thinking, ethical, social, integrational, and legal (Hackl et al., 2026). For leaders, these dimensions must be complemented by strategic capabilities including change management, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and policy development. Effective AI integration requires not only AI literacy and training but also clear ethical guidelines, suggesting leadership must establish institutional frameworks rather than relying solely on individual capabilities (Almási et al., 2025). Faculty perceptions reveal concerns about algorithmic opacity, data governance, and academic integrity, indicating leaders must address challenges encompassing technical, ethical, and cultural dimensions (Buele & Llerena-Aguirre, 2025). While technical AI literacy represents a necessary foundation, effective leadership demands broader capacities to navigate regulatory complexity, build institutional cultures that balance innovation with core values, develop support structures addressing diverse faculty needs, and make strategic decisions about resource allocation amid rapid technological change.

These global challenges manifest distinctively in different institutional contexts. Romanian universities face the dual challenge of advancing digital transformation while developing AI-specific responses. Research indicates that many institutions continue to address foundational digital infrastructure gaps even as AI incorporation accelerates (Fleaca et al., 2022). Work examining Romanian higher education emphasizes the importance of faculty reskilling and capacity-building to ensure institutions can respond effectively to technological change (Vuc et al., 2026). Studies of specific sectors, such as public administration education, show that while AI presents opportunities for program innovation, implementation varies considerably across institutions with different resource levels and strategic priorities (Popescu et al., 2023). These studies provide valuable insight into Romania's AI adoption landscape, yet they focus primarily on faculty experiences and student outcomes rather than on how institutional leaders in research-intensive universities conceptualize integration challenges and develop strategic responses.

Our review reveals a significant gap: relatively little scholarship examines how institutional leaders at research-intensive universities conceptualize AI integration challenges and develop strategic responses. While existing studies document diverse institutional policies and faculty support needs, comparatively little analysis explores how leaders navigate tensions between technological adoption and established academic values, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Leadership perspectives matter because these actors shape the policies, support frameworks, and institutional cultures that determine how AI is adopted in practice.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how leaders at Romania's research-intensive universities understand and respond to AI integration challenges. Drawing on boundary work theory, it explores how leaders define appropriate boundaries for AI use, balance innovation with tradition, and develop strategies to support diverse stakeholder needs. Through in-depth interviews with leaders from seven top Romanian institutions, the study emphasizes interpretive frameworks and strategic reasoning rather than statistical generalization. It highlights patterns in how leaders make sense of AI integration and construct boundaries around acceptable use areas that have received limited scholarly attention but are critical for understanding institutional strategy and policy development in this rapidly evolving landscape.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Sampling

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with senior university leaders to explore institutional responses to AI integration. University leaders represent particularly valuable informants because they not only observe AI integration challenges but possess authority to shape institutional responses through policy development, resource allocation, and strategic planning. Following case study methodology (Yin, 2023) and established qualitative guidelines (Bickman & Rog, 2009), we used purposeful sampling to select information-rich cases (Faulconbridge et al., 2025). The number is considered sufficient to identify recurring themes, since the respondents are actors operating at the forefront of AI-related institutional transformation (Guest et al., 2006). Universities were chosen from Romania's top institutions in artificial intelligence according to Edurank (Edurank, 2025), ensuring participants came from organizations actively engaged in AI research and teaching. Invitations were sent to rectors, vice-rectors, or equivalent leaders at top ten institutions; seven agreed to participate. The sample includes both comprehensive and technical universities, capturing diverse institutional contexts: Technical University of Cluj-Napoca; West University of Timisoara; Politehnica University Timisoara; Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest; Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi; Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca; and National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest (Politehnica University of Bucharest). The order of the above presented universities is given by the order of responses to the interview requests and does not represent a hierarchy between the institutions. They all appear quite high in the specialized Edurank list of Romanian universities recognized for AI integration. The selection also covers the major, traditional university centres in Romania, covering all geographical areas of the country. The order of the institutions in the list is also reflected in the coding of interviewees, R1 to R7, starting with the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca and ending with Politehnica University of Bucharest.

3.2. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, between August and October 2025, lasting an average of 45 minutes. Out of the seven interviewees five spoke advanced English while the other two opted to answer in Romanian, and answers were transcribed and translated afterwards. The protocol explored: (1) support structures for academic staff adopting AI ethically and effectively, (2) balancing AI innovation with traditional pedagogical values, and (3) competencies and mindsets for future academic leadership. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.3. Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed through iterative close reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and divergences in leaders' perspectives. Drawing on boundary work theory (Gieryn, 1983; Langley et al., 2019), analysis examined how leaders defined boundaries around appropriate AI use, balanced competing institutional values, and navigated tensions between innovation and tradition. The analysis captured the range of approaches and insights rather than frequency counts, reflecting the study's exploratory nature and emphasizing how leaders make sense of AI integration challenges. The process was guided by the research questions while remaining attentive to emergent themes and tensions.

3.4. Results and Discussion

The interviews reveal that Romanian university leaders engage in active boundary-work as they navigate the institutional integration of generative AI. Rather than adopting deterministic or purely instrumental narratives, leaders position themselves as mediators who define the legitimate scope, conditions, and values surrounding AI use. Across the three analytical dimensions – support structures, pedagogical balance, and future competencies – AI emerges not as an autonomous disruptor but as a contested domain requiring institutional demarcation.

The research question regarding existing or planned in institutional support structures aimed to help academic staff adopt AI effectively and ethically in their teaching shows an emerging and uneven boundary formation. The presence of formal support mechanisms varies considerably across institutions. Two respondents (R1, R2) describe structured interventions, including interdisciplinary working groups and AI-dedicated teams embedded in training departments. Others (R5, R7) point to AI hubs or laboratories, semi-formalized innovation spaces that allow experimentation within controlled environments. By contrast, R4 and R6 report the absence of institutionalized support structures, although the latter acknowledges growing pressure to establish ethical guidelines and training programs.

From a boundary-work perspective, these responses indicate that Romanian universities are at different stages of institutional stabilization. Where working groups or hubs exist, leaders actively construct organizational boundaries around AI use defining who is authorized to experiment, under what norms, and within what ethical parameters. These structures function as sites of controlled innovation, simultaneously enabling experimentation and preserving institutional oversight.

Where such structures are absent, the boundaries remain fluid and negotiable, creating what Gieryn (1983) would characterize as “credibility contests” - ongoing struggles to determine who has authority to define legitimate AI use. This fluidity suggests that boundary-work in these institutions remains in its formative stage, with

multiple actors potentially claiming jurisdictional authority. Leadership in these contexts appears anticipatory rather than regulatory, suggesting an ongoing process of institutional sense-making. This finding resonates with emerging discussions on AI governance in higher education, which emphasize the need for structured ethical frameworks and knowledge-based governance strategies to support legal awareness and AI literacy (Oncioiu & Bularca 2025). The uneven institutionalization observed in our sample reflects a broader transitional phase in European higher education governance.

Inquiring about the balance universities should strike between adopting AI tools and preserving traditional forms of learning and human interaction, the interviews revealed an attitude of protecting academic jurisdiction.

Across all interviews, respondents converge around a shared principle: AI should augment, not replace, human academic work. This recurrent framing constitutes a discursive act of boundary-work that protects the jurisdiction of academic professionals.

Leaders consistently allocate AI to domains of automation, personalization, administrative relief, and data analysis, while reserving for humans the domains of judgment, mentorship, empathy, dialogue, and critical thinking. Phrases such as “AI as co-pilot,” “pedagogy-first, AI-enabled,” and “complementarity, not replacement” reveal a deliberate demarcation between algorithmic efficiency and human intellectual authority, as R6 mentions “artificial intelligence should complement, not replace, the teacher–student relationship”.

Notably, R1 proposes a return to a “knowledge-based model” of education, arguing that as AI increasingly automates skill execution, human value lies in structured knowledge, judgment, and informed decision-making. This reframing subtly shifts the epistemic boundary: AI may execute tasks, but humans retain epistemic sovereignty. Similarly, respondents emphasize the protection and expansion of spaces for dialogue, interdisciplinary exchange, and mentorship.

These narratives align with broader critical analyses of AI discourses in higher education, which show that institutions often negotiate between techno-optimism and humanistic preservation (Bearman et al., 2023). Rather than resisting AI, the leaders in this study domesticate it, integrating it within a normative framework that safeguards academic identity and relational pedagogy. This echoes findings from faculty perception studies that highlight both openness to AI and concerns regarding academic autonomy and professional transformation (Buele & Llerena-Aguirre 2025).

In boundary-work terms, leaders are not merely adopting technology; they are actively redrawing the boundary between technological augmentation and pedagogical authority. In this context, a recurring topic refers to the ethical aspects of using and integrating AI in pedagogy and research. For example, R2 highlights that “a clear, and strong ethical framework of usage, especially related to usage in research needs to be created, assumed and shared”.

In the effort to navigate an AI-driven world a practical question arises – what are the skills or mindsets future academics and leaders need the most, thus reconfiguring the boundary of expertise.

Respondents consistently emphasize AI literacy, ethical awareness, critical thinking, adaptability, and systems thinking. R3 adds “mentorship and communication skills” as part the kit for the future. Strikingly, none of the interviewees advocate advanced technical specialization as a universal requirement. “Basic digital skills are needed not necessarily for coding, rather for making smart choices” – remarked R2. Therefore, we

notice that leaders call for foundational understanding of AI mechanisms, awareness of algorithmic bias, and the capacity to evaluate AI outputs critically.

R1's metaphor of the "intellectual totem" – a benchmark for distinguishing authentic knowledge from AI-generated fabrication – captures the epistemic dimension of boundary-work. Leaders see their role as cultivating internal criteria that allow academics and students to differentiate between credible knowledge and synthetic output. This aligns with recent empirical findings on the importance of AI literacy and digital competence among university staff (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2025).

Furthermore, respondents highlight adaptive mindsets, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ethical judgment as central attributes of future leadership. These resonate with the taxonomy of smart skills (Padurean, 2023) and student-centered governance discussions, which stress participatory and ethically grounded AI integration (Barus et al. 2025). The emphasis on responsible use, rather than technical mastery alone, reflects a shift from technological expertise toward meta-epistemic competence – the ability to define when and why AI should be used.

In this sense, the boundary of academic expertise is being redefined. The academic of the future is not replaced by AI but repositioned as a critical mediator between algorithmic systems and human values.

4. Conclusions

This study examined how university leaders at Romania's leading AI-focused institutions navigate generative AI integration through the lens of boundary-work theory. The findings reveal that academic leaders function as boundary actors operating at three interrelated levels: institutional, pedagogical, and epistemic. At the institutional level, they establish or anticipate governance structures that regulate AI experimentation and ethical standards. At the pedagogical level, they delineate AI's appropriate scope while safeguarding human-centered learning. At the epistemic level, they redefine the competencies that preserve academic authority in an AI-driven environment.

Rather than framing AI as an external disruption, Romanian university leaders interpret it as a catalyst for redefining institutional identity through a process of negotiated integration. Three key tensions emerge from this process. First, institutional support structures remain uneven. Some universities have established formal AI working groups and hubs, while others operate without structured guidance, indicating different stages of boundary stabilization. Second, leaders consistently emphasize augmentation over replacement, allocating AI to tasks of automation and personalization while reserving judgment, mentorship, and critical thinking for human academics. This demarcation domesticates AI within a normative framework that preserves academic identity. Third, leaders reconceptualize academic expertise as fundamentally meta-epistemic rather than purely technical, emphasizing critical evaluation, ethical judgment, and adaptability over advanced technical specialization.

These findings carry several implications for practice and policy. Universities should recognize that effective AI integration requires deliberate institutional architecture – governance structures, ethical frameworks, and professional development programs – rather than ad hoc technology adoption. Policy development must move beyond binary adoption-or-resistance framings to articulate appropriate use contexts that preserve spaces for human judgment while strategically deploying AI for efficiency gains. Professional development should prioritize meta-epistemic competencies that enable

academics to mediate between algorithmic systems and human values. Finally, European regulatory frameworks, particularly the forthcoming EU AI Act, should acknowledge institutional leadership's central role in translating high-level principles into contextually appropriate practices.

The study contributes to emerging scholarship on institutional governance and strategic responses to AI in higher education by foregrounding leadership perspectives, an underexplored area despite leaders' authority to shape institutional responses. By examining Romania's context, it addresses a geographical gap in AI integration literature, which has predominantly focused on Western European and North American institutions. Most significantly, the findings demonstrate that university leaders function as active mediators whose boundary-work, defining what belongs inside and outside institutional practice, what counts as appropriate use, and who possesses relevant expertise, fundamentally shapes how generative AI transforms higher education. The sustainability of higher education in the AI era depends not only on technological adoption but on the capacity to preserve and redefine academic values within changing epistemic conditions.

5. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. It draws on interviews with seven university leaders from Romania's nearly 100 higher education institutions. While these participants represent organizations at the forefront of AI research and teaching, their perspectives may not reflect leaders at universities with different missions, resources, or levels of AI engagement. Second, the findings capture perceptions and intentions during early-stage AI adoption (late 2025), which may evolve rapidly as technologies and institutional practices develop. Third, as with all interview-based research, the study reflects leaders' stated strategies rather than observed implementation.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Broadening the sample to include teaching-focused or regional universities would reveal whether AI integration strategies vary by institutional type. Integrating faculty, student, and administrative staff perspectives would assess alignment between leadership visions and ground-level experiences. Moving beyond stated intentions, studies could examine actual implementation through policy analysis, training program evaluation, or direct observation of AI adoption in practice. Longitudinal research would track how strategies evolve over time, while comparative studies across European higher education systems could clarify how national contexts and regulatory frameworks shape institutional responses. Finally, while boundary-work theory provided a valuable analytical lens, future research might apply alternative frameworks, such as institutional theory or sense-making approaches, to investigate different aspects of organizational responses to technological change.

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views fairly. Their insights have enriched our understanding of how higher education institutions navigate technological transformation while preserving academic values.

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