



Re-Imagining the *Imago Dei* in the Digital Age: Artificial Intelligence and the Formation of Student Identity in Higher Education

Author

Abigail Gichaba Osoro ⁽¹⁾ 

Author's email: keruboabigail24@gmail.com

University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya.

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Abstract

This study re-examines the theological concept of the *Imago Dei* (Image of God), particularly its biblical grounding in Genesis 1:26–27, as an interpretive framework for understanding these transformations. The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, literature-based methodology that brings theological anthropology into conversation with philosophy of technology and contemporary higher education scholarship. Sources were identified through a structured search and selection process, examined against explicit relevance criteria, and synthesised through thematic analysis. Four themes emerged from the interdisciplinary literature: human agency and dignity, cognitive formation and externalisation, digitally mediated identity and authorship, and ethical-relational formation. The findings indicate that AI can augment learning and creativity but may also encourage cognitive dependence, blur conventional understandings of authorship, and intensify the tendency to evaluate students through measurable digital outputs. Contemporary higher education scholarship similarly emphasises the importance of human agency, critical engagement, ethical governance, and responsible AI literacy. The study argues that the *Imago Dei* provides a constructive theological framework to ensure that AI remains a means of supporting, rather than replacing, human intellectual, moral, relational, and spiritual formation. The paper proposes a human-centred model of AI integration in higher education grounded in dignity, agency, discernment, relationality, and holistic formation.

Key terms: Generative AI, *Imago Dei*, student identity, theological anthropology.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), has become an increasingly influential feature of contemporary higher education. Universities and students are using AI tools for information retrieval, writing assistance, problem-solving, feedback, research support, and content generation. The increasing presence of these technologies is changing not only educational practices but also assumptions about knowledge, authorship, intellectual work, and the role of the learner. UNESCO (2023), for example, emphasises that AI in education should be developed and implemented through a human-centred approach that protects human agency, inclusion, equity, and meaningful educational engagement.

The growing use of AI also raises questions concerning student identity. Higher education is not simply a process through which students acquire information or technical competencies. It is also a formative environment in which students develop intellectual habits, moral dispositions, relationships, vocational aspirations, and understandings of themselves and others. When AI performs increasing portions of intellectual work, questions arise concerning what students learn, how they learn, and what kind of persons they become through the educational process.

The theological doctrine of the *Imago Dei* provides a significant framework for examining these questions. Genesis 1:26–27 presents human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. Christian theological anthropology has interpreted this image in relation to human dignity, rationality, relationality, moral responsibility, vocation, and participation in God's purposes (Augustine, 1991; Aquinas, 1981; Barth, 1960; Middleton, 2005). Genesis 2:7 further presents human life through the imagery of God's breath, emphasising the distinctive character of human existence. The theological claim is therefore not merely that human beings possess sophisticated cognitive capacities, but that human personhood encompasses relational, moral, embodied, spiritual, and vocational dimensions.

This distinction is increasingly important in an educational environment in which AI systems can generate fluent language, summarise information, produce arguments, and imitate aspects of human reasoning. The capacity of AI to perform such tasks may challenge conventional assumptions about intelligence and knowledge. At the same time, recent research indicates that excessive reliance on AI dialogue systems may create risks for students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and decision-making (Zhai et al., 2024). Other research suggests that generative AI is also reshaping understandings of authorship and academic identity in higher education (Duah & McGivern, 2024).

The issue, therefore, is not simply whether AI should be accepted or rejected. Rather, the central question is how AI can be incorporated into higher education without reducing education to technological efficiency or students to producers of algorithmically optimised outputs. This study addresses that question by bringing the *Imago Dei* into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on AI and higher education.

The study asks three questions:

1. How does the interdisciplinary literature characterise the effects of AI on human agency, cognition, and student identity in higher education?
2. What themes emerge when theological anthropology is brought into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on AI and higher education?
3. How can the *Imago Dei* provide a constructive framework for integrating human-centred AI with student formation?

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, literature-based research design. The approach was selected because the research questions concern meanings, assumptions, interpretations, and conceptual relationships rather than the measurement of variables. A literature-based approach is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to bring three bodies of scholarship into dialogue: theological anthropology, philosophy and ethics of technology, and higher education research. The interpretive orientation is important because concepts such as human identity, agency, dignity, learning, authorship, and formation cannot be adequately understood through numerical measurement alone. The approach enables the researcher to examine how different scholarly traditions conceptualise these issues and to identify points of convergence, tension, and complementarity across disciplines.

The study is not presented as a systematic review or meta-analysis. Rather, it is an interpretive interdisciplinary literature synthesis. Its purpose is to develop a theological and educational interpretation of AI-mediated student formation by critically synthesising the relevant literature. The approach therefore prioritises conceptual relevance, disciplinary diversity, theoretical significance, and contemporary relevance over statistical aggregation. The literature was organised into three principal domains: theological and biblical scholarship; philosophical and ethical scholarship on technology and AI; and higher education scholarship on AI, learning, identity, assessment, and student formation. The theological literature was identified through searches focusing on the terms *Imago Dei*, *image of God*, theological anthropology, human personhood, human dignity, Christian formation, Genesis 1:26–27, and Genesis 2:7.

Foundational theological works were deliberately included to provide historical and conceptual depth. These included Augustine's account of the divine image, Aquinas's theological anthropology, Barth's treatment of humanity in relation to God and others, and contemporary interpretations of the *Imago Dei*. Philosophical and technological sources were identified through searches combining terms such as *artificial intelligence*, *generative AI*, *human agency*, *technology and human identity*, *AI ethics*, *AI and cognition*, and *philosophy of technology*. Particular attention was given to literature addressing the relationship between technological capability and human agency.

Higher education sources were identified using combinations of the following keywords: *generative AI*, *higher education*, *university students*, *student identity*, *AI literacy*, *academic integrity*, *critical thinking*, *authorship*, *assessment*, and *AI-supported learning*. Contemporary institutional and policy literature was also included where it directly addressed the educational and ethical implications of AI. UNESCO's

guidance was particularly relevant because it explicitly emphasises human agency, ethical safeguards, inclusion, and meaningful educational engagement in the use of GenAI (UNESCO, 2023).

Sources were included when they met at least one of the following criteria

- They directly addressed the *Imago Dei*, theological anthropology, human dignity, personhood, or Christian formation.
- They examined AI in relation to human cognition, agency, identity, ethics, or personhood.
- They addressed the use of AI or GenAI in higher education.
- They examined student learning, identity, authorship, academic integrity, critical thinking, or AI literacy.
- They contributed significant theoretical, philosophical, theological, empirical, or policy perspectives relevant to the research questions.
- They were sufficiently authoritative to support scholarly analysis, including peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and major institutional publications.

Sources were excluded when they were unrelated to higher education, human identity, theological anthropology, or the ethical and educational implications of AI; when they consisted primarily of commercial promotional material; or when their claims could not be adequately evaluated within the scope of the study. Foundational theological texts were not excluded based on publication date because their purpose was to establish the historical and conceptual foundations of the *Imago Dei*. In contrast, contemporary AI and higher education literature was prioritised to ensure that the theological analysis engaged with current academic debates.

The analysis proceeded through five interconnected stages.

Stage 1: Familiarisation. Selected sources were read repeatedly to identify their central arguments, concepts, and claims concerning AI, human identity, cognition, agency, education, and formation. Biblical and theological texts were examined separately from contemporary empirical and educational literature to avoid conflating theological exposition with findings from the interdisciplinary literature.

Stage 2: Initial coding. Relevant passages and arguments were assigned descriptive codes. Initial codes included *human dignity, agency, cognitive externalisation, critical thinking, authorship, academic integrity, algorithmic mediation, AI literacy, relationality, moral responsibility, embodiment, and spiritual formation*.

Stage 3: Categorisation. Related codes were compared and grouped into broader analytical categories. For example, codes relating to cognitive offloading, independent reasoning, problem-solving, and intellectual effort were grouped under cognitive formation. Similarly, authorship, academic integrity, algorithmic evaluation, and digital self-presentation were grouped under the heading of digitally mediated identity and ethical formation.

Stage 4: Theme development and review. The categories were compared across the theological, philosophical, and higher education literature. Themes were retained when they demonstrated conceptual recurrence across multiple sources or provided a significant point of convergence or tension between disciplines. Themes were revised where categories overlapped or lacked sufficient explanatory coherence.

Stage 5: Thematic synthesis and interpretation. The final themes were synthesised in relation to the research questions and subsequently interpreted through the *Imago Dei* framework. The analysis distinguished between what the interdisciplinary literature directly indicated and the theological interpretation developed by the researcher. This distinction was maintained throughout the Results and Discussion sections.

Several strategies were used to strengthen methodological rigour. First, the study employed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to reduce arbitrary source selection. Second, literature from three disciplinary domains was compared rather than relying exclusively on theological sources. This interdisciplinary triangulation enabled theological claims to be examined alongside contemporary philosophical and higher education scholarship.

Third, the coding and thematic process was structured into successive stages of familiarisation, coding, categorisation, theme development, and synthesis. Fourth, contemporary AI scholarship was incorporated alongside foundational theological literature to prevent the theological analysis from becoming detached from current educational realities. Finally, theological exposition was analytically distinguished from findings derived from the interdisciplinary literature.

Limitations and Mitigation

The study had several limitations. First, AI is developing rapidly, meaning scholarship can become outdated in a relatively short time. This limitation was mitigated by prioritising recent scholarship on GenAI and higher education while retaining foundational theological works to maintain conceptual continuity. Second, the literature-based design does not provide direct empirical evidence of how individual students experience AI-mediated identity formation. This limitation was addressed by drawing on contemporary empirical and qualitative studies of AI use in higher education and by avoiding claims that exceed the evidence. Third, the interdisciplinary nature of the literature introduces differences in terminology, assumptions, and methods across theology, philosophy, and education. This was mitigated through thematic coding and cross-disciplinary comparison. Finally, the interpretive nature of the study means that the resulting theological framework represents a reasoned interpretation rather than an objectively exhaustive account of all possible theological perspectives.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results section reports the analytical patterns identified across the interdisciplinary literature. It does not provide extended biblical exposition or theological interpretation; those elements are reserved primarily for the Discussion section.

Human Agency and the Preservation of Human Dignity

The first analytical theme concerns the continuing importance of human agency in AI-mediated education. Across contemporary higher education and policy literature, AI is increasingly understood as a tool that

can support learning while also creating risks when its outputs replace rather than support human judgment. UNESCO (2023) emphasises that educational applications of GenAI should protect human agency and ensure that technology contributes to meaningful, human-centred learning.

The literature therefore distinguishes between AI as an assistive technology and AI as a substitute for human intellectual activity. The distinction is significant for student formation because learning involves more than producing correct answers. It involves judgment, reflection, interpretation, evaluation, and responsibility.

The analysis further indicates that technological competence should not be treated as equivalent to human personhood (Floridi, 2014). AI can reproduce patterns associated with human language and reasoning, but the literature does not establish that such computational performance constitutes human moral agency, relational personhood, or spiritual identity. This distinction provides an important analytical basis for examining the *Imago Dei* without simply equating computational sophistication with human identity.

Cognitive Externalisation and the Transformation of Learning

The second theme concerns cognitive externalisation. Generative AI allows students to delegate tasks such as drafting, summarising, brainstorming, explaining concepts, and solving problems. This can increase efficiency and provide useful learning support. However, the literature also suggests that excessive reliance on AI may reduce students' engagement in independent cognitive processes.

Zhai et al. (2024), in a systematic review of research on AI dialogue systems, identified concerns regarding over-reliance, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, decision-making, and a tendency to accept AI-generated outputs without sufficient verification. These findings indicate that the educational significance of AI cannot be assessed only by the quality or speed of its outputs. The process through which students arrive at knowledge is also important.

The analytical finding is therefore not that AI necessarily weakens cognition. Rather, the literature indicates a conditional relationship: AI can support cognition when students critically engage with its outputs, but excessive or uncritical dependence may displace some of the cognitive effort through which learning occurs.

Digitally Mediated Identity and Authorship

The third theme concerns the transformation of student identity through digitally mediated learning. AI changes the relationship between students, texts, knowledge, and academic production. Students can increasingly generate academic prose and other forms of content without undertaking all of the intellectual labour traditionally associated with producing such work.

Duah and McGivern (2024) found that GenAI has blurred conventional understandings of authorial identity and academic norms in higher education. Their findings highlight tensions surrounding academic misconduct, authorship, institutional policies, and the appropriate role of AI in academic work. The analysis therefore identifies authorship as more than a technical question. It is connected to how students understand themselves as learners and knowledge producers. When AI generates substantial portions of academic work, conventional relationships among effort, authorship, responsibility, and academic identity become less clear.

Contemporary research also suggests that AI can influence positive dimensions of student identity. Li et al. (2026), for example, found relationships among university students between AI literacy, creative self-efficacy, and creative personal identity. This indicates that AI-mediated identity formation is not exclusively negative. AI literacy may contribute to students' sense of themselves as capable and creative users of technology when appropriate educational conditions are present.

Ethical and Relational Formation

The fourth theme concerns ethical responsibility and the relational nature of education. The literature identifies academic integrity, privacy, transparency, bias, authorship, and responsible use as major challenges associated with AI in higher education. These issues demonstrate that AI adoption is not simply a technical decision but also an ethical and institutional one. The literature further indicates that responsible AI integration requires institutional policies, educator guidance, and student AI literacy.

Similarly, UNESCO (2023) emphasises ethical validation, human agency, inclusion, and meaningful educational engagement, while de Fine Licht (2024) demonstrates that serious ethical arguments exist both for and against unrestricted student use of GenAI. The analytical finding is that responsible AI use requires more than rules governing acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It requires students to develop judgment concerning when, why, and how technology should be used. This shifts the educational focus from technological competence alone toward ethical and reflective competence.

Discussion

Re-Imagining the *Imago Dei* in the Digital Age

The findings can be interpreted through the lens of the *Imago Dei* as a theological account of human dignity and vocation. Genesis 1:26–27 presents humanity as created in God's image and likeness. The significance of this theological claim is not that humans are superior information processors. Rather, human identity is understood in relation to God, other human beings, moral responsibility, vocation, and embodied existence.

Moreover, Augustine (1991), Aquinas (1981), Barth (1960), and Middleton (2005) approach the *Imago Dei* from different theological perspectives, but collectively they demonstrate that human identity cannot be reduced to a single capacity. The human person is multidimensional. Consequently, the emergence of machines capable of simulating selected cognitive activities does not eliminate the theological basis for human dignity.

The findings from contemporary AI scholarship strengthen this theological argument. UNESCO's (2023) human-centred approach emphasises that AI should support, rather than displace, human agency. Similarly, research on AI over-reliance demonstrates that technological convenience can become problematic when students cease to critically evaluate AI outputs (Zhai et al., 2024). The *Imago Dei* therefore offers a theological rationale for maintaining human agency at the centre of education.

Cognitive Formation and the Meaning of Learning

The findings suggest that the educational problem is not AI assistance itself but the possibility of replacing formative intellectual activity with technological convenience. Education requires students to encounter difficulty, uncertainty, ambiguity, and intellectual challenge. Such experiences contribute to the

development of judgment and intellectual maturity. This observation resonates with James 1:2–4, where perseverance through difficulty is associated with maturity. The text does not directly address AI, and therefore should not be presented as an empirical finding about AI. Rather, it provides a theological lens through which the educational significance of cognitive struggle can be interpreted.

From this perspective, AI should be incorporated into pedagogical practices that preserve opportunities for independent reasoning, reflection, questioning, revision, and intellectual struggle. The objective should be to develop students who can use AI critically rather than students who are dependent upon AI for intellectual functioning.

Identity, Authorship, and the Digital Student

The findings concerning authorship and identity are particularly important for theological anthropology. If students increasingly rely on AI to generate academic work, the relationship between identity and authorship becomes more complex. Academic writing traditionally provides students with opportunities to articulate their own interpretations, arguments, and developing intellectual identities. When substantial portions of this process are delegated to AI, students may receive a polished product without experiencing the full formative process that produces it.

At the same time, the evidence from Li et al. (2026) cautions against portraying AI exclusively as a threat. AI literacy can be associated with creative personal identity and self-efficacy. The theological response should therefore not be technological rejection but responsible integration. The *Imago Dei* provides a framework for navigating this tension. Students should be encouraged to use AI creatively while retaining responsibility for judgment, authorship, verification, and ethical decision-making. In this sense, authentic education involves learning to exercise human agency in relation to technology.

Relationality, Embodiment, and Human Formation

Ugwulebo (2026) strengthens this relational understanding by offering a Levinasian critique of the possibility that AI could replace God. His argument highlights the limits of artificial systems in capturing the ethical and relational dimensions of human existence. From an *Imago Dei* perspective, human identity is not defined merely by intellectual or computational capacity but is formed through relationships, ethical responsibility, and encounter with others. This resonates with Genesis 2:18, which affirms that it is not good for human beings to be alone. Thus, while AI may facilitate communication and learning, it cannot substitute for the relational and ethical encounters through which students develop their identities and understand their responsibilities to God and others.

This has important implications for AI-mediated education. If students increasingly interact with technological systems rather than with teachers, peers, mentors, and communities, higher education may become more efficient while less relational. Such a development would be problematic if education is understood as the formation of the whole person.

Selwyn (2019) argues that AI should complement rather than replace human teaching and learning. In higher education, this is important for student formation because education develops not only knowledge but also critical thinking, ethical judgment, relationships, and responsibility. From an *Imago Dei* perspective, AI may replicate aspects of human reasoning but cannot replace the moral, relational, and spiritual dimensions of human identity.

Consequently, theological anthropology challenges universities to preserve dialogue, mentorship, collaboration, community engagement, and embodied learning. AI can support these activities, but it should not eliminate the relationships through which students develop their moral, social, and vocational identities.

Ethical Implications for Higher Education

The findings indicate that universities require a human-centred approach to AI governance. Policies should address academic integrity, privacy, transparency, bias, assessment, authorship, and responsible use. However, policy should not be limited to prohibition. Students also require AI literacy to evaluate outputs, recognise limitations, identify bias, verify information, and make ethically responsible decisions.

Contemporary higher education scholarship supports this position. Duah and McGivern (2024) identify uncertainty surrounding authorship and institutional policy, while de Fine Licht (2024) demonstrates that legitimate ethical disagreement exists regarding the appropriate degree of student access to GenAI. These debates suggest that universities need context-sensitive policies rather than simplistic assumptions that AI is either wholly beneficial or wholly harmful. The theological contribution is to add a deeper account of why such policies matter. If students possess intrinsic dignity as persons created in the image of God, educational technologies should be evaluated according to whether they promote or undermine human flourishing.

Human-Centred Framework for AI and Student Formation

Based on the findings and their theological interpretation, this study proposes five principles for integrating AI into higher education:

1. **Dignity.** AI policies and practices should treat students as persons rather than merely as sources of data or producers of measurable outputs.
2. **Agency.** Students should remain responsible for evaluating, interpreting, and taking responsibility for AI-assisted work.
3. **Discernment.** AI literacy should include the capacity to identify inaccurate, biased, incomplete, or misleading outputs.
4. **Relationality.** AI should complement rather than replace relationships among students, educators, mentors, and communities.
5. **Holistic formation.** Higher education should continue to cultivate intellectual, moral, social, vocational, and spiritual dimensions of student development.

This framework reframes the question from "How can universities use AI more efficiently?" to "How can universities use AI while preserving the purposes of human education?"

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The integration of artificial intelligence into higher education is reshaping learning, knowledge production, authorship, assessment, and student identity. This study has shown, through an interdisciplinary literature synthesis, that four major themes are particularly significant: human agency and dignity, cognitive externalisation, digitally mediated identity and authorship, and ethical-relational formation. The findings do not support a simple conclusion that AI is either inherently beneficial or inherently harmful to students. Rather, the consequences of AI depend substantially on how it is incorporated into educational practices. AI can enhance creativity, accessibility, efficiency, and learning support, but excessive dependence may weaken opportunities for independent reasoning and complicate conventional understandings of authorship and academic identity.

The *Imago Dei* provides a constructive theological framework for navigating these tensions. It reminds higher education that human identity cannot be reduced to computational intelligence, academic productivity, or measurable digital performance. Human beings are relational, moral, embodied, spiritual, and vocational persons whose dignity is grounded in their relationship with God.

Recommendations: The appropriate response to AI in higher education is neither uncritical adoption nor blanket rejection. Universities should pursue responsible integration in which AI augments human capacities while preserving human agency, discernment, relationality, integrity, and holistic formation. In this way, technological innovation can remain accountable to the deeper purposes of higher education and to a theological vision of humanity grounded in the *Imago Dei*.

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