THE NEED FOR AN AUTHENTIC AND UNITARY NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR AI RESEARCH ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based platforms has transformed research ethics in an unprecedented manner. With the development of AI tools ranging from spell-checkers to advanced data analysis, AI use in research has become increasingly widespread. Consequently, several higher education institutions, nationally and globally, have adopted guidelines governing AI use. However, such guidelines may lack uniformity or be transplanted across institutions and jurisdictions without sufficient contextual adaptation. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the need for an authentic and unitary national framework for AI research ethics in Sri Lankan higher education institutions through the lens of inclusivity and equality. Employing a doctrinal and comparative approach, the paper draws upon *UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* and the *EU's Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research* to assess three ethical considerations in the Sri Lankan context. First, fairness, non-discrimination and contextual inclusivity require safeguards against algorithmic bias and the uncritical adoption of Western-centric AI systems that may inadequately reflect Sri Lanka's linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity. Second, equitable accessibility and AI literacy require attention to disparities in technological access, digital capabilities and institutional resources that may marginalise disadvantaged researchers. Third, research integrity, transparency and accountability call for common minimum standards on disclosing AI use, verifying AI-generated outputs and maintaining human oversight and responsibility, while permitting institutional flexibility. The paper argues that these interconnected considerations justify an authentic and unitary national framework establishing minimum ethical standards, supported by institution-specific implementation mechanisms. Such a framework would adapt internationally recognised ethical principles to Sri Lanka's distinctive circumstances without imposing identical operational requirements on all higher education institutions. It would promote responsible and equitable AI-assisted research while accommodating differences in institutional resources and disciplinary needs.

Keywords: AI in Research, Research Ethics, Sri Lanka, AI Governance, Higher Education Institutions