Beyond AI as a Tool: Reframing Artificial Intelligence as a Leadership Partner in Higher Education, *Evidence from Expert Perspectives*

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Abstract:

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping higher education by influencing decision-making, strategic planning, and institutional governance. However, existing literature largely conceptualizes AI as a technological tool that supports human leaders rather than as an active partner in leadership processes. This paper challenges this perspective by exploring AI as a leadership partner that contributes to strategic thinking, collaborative decision-making, and organizational intelligence within universities. Drawing on qualitative insights from higher education experts, the paper examines one dimension of a broader research project focusing on leadership transformation in AI-enabled universities. It specifically explores the evolving relationship between human leaders and AI, emphasizing how experts perceive AI as extending beyond operational assistance toward participation in selected leadership functions.

The findings indicate that AI is increasingly perceived as enhancing strategic insights, supporting evidence-informed decisions, fostering organizational learning, and enabling more distributed leadership practices. These perspectives suggest a transition from technology-supported leadership toward AI-partnered leadership, with significant implications for leadership development and university governance. The paper contributes to emerging discussions on AI and educational leadership by introducing a conceptual perspective that positions AI as a collaborative partner in university leadership. It also provides practical implications for developing effective human–AI collaboration practices in increasingly intelligent higher education environments.

Keywords:

Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education Leadership, Human–AI Collaboration, Leadership Partnership, Organizational Intelligence, University Governance.