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Unequal academics: AI as a threat to the voice and agency of Asian women in academia

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The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been identified as one of the fastest-growing areas in higher education. While AI improves productivity, it simultaneously shapes knowledge production, distribution and evaluation. Utilising a Foucauldian analytical lens, I use voice, agency and epistemic justice as integrated analytical tools to examine how AI-mediated systems constrain the voice and agency of Asian women academics in Western higher education institutions. This conceptual paper argues that AI is not a neutral tool; it is a discursive force embedded within existing structures of power as it standardises academic expression, mediates scholarly visibility, and reproduces existing gendered and racialised inequalities. When we lose Asian women's voices in academic discourse, we risk inaccurate decision-making and the reproduction of structural inequalities. By presenting Asian women academics as a critical case in the debate about scaling up AI use in universities, it provides a conceptual diagnosis of deeper systemic issues with AI. It calls for institutions to create strong academic leadership and AI governance protocols. Our future should be shaped by governance and leadership, not technology.

KEYWORDS

agency, artificial intelligence, Asian women academics, Foucauldian discourse analysis, higher education, voice

Introduction

If knowledge is power, as Michel Foucault argues, and media shapes how we think, as Marshall McLuhan suggests, then Artificial Intelligence (AI) is more than just technology. It shapes who gets heard and who is excluded from the structure of power.

AI is shaping the socio-political discourse around 'how' we know and 'what' we know. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of technology for teaching, learning and research within higher education has rapidly increased. Indeed, AI promises productivity gains, personalised learning, and automation of academic tasks (Birt et al., 2024; Cochrane and Birt, 2025; Conn et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2025). Universities have seen a shift toward digital, data-driven, and metric-based evaluation.

In higher education, it is reshaping how knowledge is produced, taught, and evaluated. Across universities globally, AI is increasingly embedded in teaching practices, research workflows, and institutional governance. It is often framed as a tool for enhancing efficiency, productivity, and innovation (AIinhe.org, 2024; Birt et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2025; Cochrane and Birt, 2025; Henderson et al., 2025; MckinseyandCompany, 2023). Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) has national strategies that actively promote AI adoption as part of a future-oriented education system (Ministry of Education NZ, 2025; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2024; OECD, n.d.).

Within this dominant narrative, AI is positioned as a democratising force that can expand access to knowledge, support academic labour, and align higher education with the demands of a rapidly evolving labour market (Ministry of Education NZ, 2025; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2024; OECD, n.d.).

However, this enthusiastic framing, along with the emerging ethical discussions (Li et al., 2024, 2025), obscures an underexamined question: who benefits from the integration of AI in academia, and at whose expense? While algorithms are often presented as neutral and objective, a growing body of research demonstrates that AI systems reproduce and amplify existing social biases (Färber et al., 2023; Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2025; Russ-Smith and Lazarus, 2024; Stinson, 2022), particularly those related to gender and race (Li et al., 2024; Shrestha and Das, 2022; Yu et al., 2020). Recent scholarship has examined the ethical impact of GenAI tools in higher education and highlighted concerns around academic integrity, biases and the potential for unfair or discriminatory results towards minority groups or cultural knowledge (Li et al., 2024, 2025). These biases are not necessarily the result of intentional design, but emerge from historic bias and institutional practices that privilege certain groups over others. For example, face recognition data could be biased against certain races or genders due to a lack of representation in the training data pool (Yu et al., 2020). This example is indicative of a broader pattern: AI systems do not simply reflect inequality; they actively participate in its reproduction. As universities adopt data-driven and metric-based evaluation, tensions emerge between commitments to inclusivity and AI systems that are largely trained on dominant forms of knowledge and visibility. These concerns are particularly relevant to NZ, where higher education institutions are expected to recognise diverse forms of knowledge and support equitable participation in knowledge production (Black et al., 2012).

There remains limited attention to how AI-mediated systems intersect with existing structures of power within academia. Grounded in the tradition of critical theory in giving voice to the marginalised, I employ a Foucauldian discourse approach (Fairclough, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Kouros, 2026; Wodak and Meyer, 2016) and use voice, agency, and epistemic justice as analytical tools to examine how AI-mediated academic discourse shapes whose knowledge is heard, recognised, and institutionally valued. This conceptual paper asks: In what ways does AI in higher education threaten the academic voice, agency, and epistemic standing of Asian women academics? The continued absence of Asian women in academia is not merely a question of representation, but the absence of critical perspectives that nuance social issues, providing important contexts, lived experiences, and population-level knowledge. By presenting Asian women academics as a critical case in the debate about scaling up AI use in higher education, this paper provides a conceptual diagnosis of deeper systemic issues.

(re)defining academic voice and agency

Voice and agency are two sides of a coin to individual emancipation as they are intrinsically linked to structural issues

in social domains. Adhering to a Foucauldian discourse approach, this paper views knowledge not only as the production of scientific facts, but as a historical process shaped by institutional structures and discourse (Fairclough, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Kouros, 2026; Leipold and Winkel, 2017; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In light of this viewpoint, discourse is understood as a means to construct social reality (Fairclough, 1993), and consequently, it reflects systems of thought. Adhering to this theoretical lens, discourse is seen as a regulative practice that ‘binds’ people together and paradoxically delimits the agent’s capability to act within the discursive boundaries

Kouros (2026, p.1) articulated AI exercises power predominantly at the level of discourse as they “shape how explanations are structured, how problems are framed, and what counts as reasonable or legitimate articulation”. Since academia increasingly relies on AI for productivity, generative AI can therefore be understood as a discursive force that shapes knowledge production and subsequently the epistemological truth of academia. Through this lens, the paper examines how AI-mediated discourse may constrain or redistribute the voice and agency of Asian women academics.

Agency

Leipold and Winkel (2017) have articulated that agency is fundamental to representation, responsibility, and legitimacy in discursive practices. As discursive agents must function within a particular discourse (Kouros, 2026), their agency can only exist if the actors have the capacity to act within the structural boundaries of that particular discourse. Marignier (2020) defines agency as a “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act”, agency is thus bound to institutional practises. In this sense, while an agent is needed as a social actor, their agency is structurally pre-determined and cannot be taken for granted.

In higher education, academic agency is related to an individual’s capacity to publish, lead and influence. It emerges through interactions among multiple actors. Individual scholars gain visibility through the dissemination of their work, but this visibility is also mediated by others who dominate the physical and discursive realms within academic and institutional spaces. These then link to certain non-discursive resources like better jobs/positions, income, projects, etc. In this light, agency is shaped by who dominates the space at a structural level in terms of representation and legitimacy. Thus, agency is relational and shapes relevance and visibility.

Voice

Moore and Muller (1999) defined ‘voice’ as a positioning that is intricately linked to what counts as knowledge, how we obtain it and under what hierarchical structure. The academic voice is shaped by whose knowledge is heard and legitimised via citations, metrics or appearances in the field (speech, lecture, etc). This is not an individual process but one that often involves other actors, such as authors, reviewers, editors, and institutions. Collectively, they determine what is recognised as valid knowledge. Through this structured chain of command,

certain ideas and ideologies are normalised, as a result, it creates epistemology around norms, potentially creating epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) as it shapes how success is measured. In higher education, epistemic injustice occurs when certain forms of knowledge, identities, or perspectives are systematically excluded from the processes of knowledge production and validation (McEntee et al., 2024). Therefore, this paper defines academic voice as a collective endeavour shaped by institutional structures, which significantly influence norms and epistemic justice.

As AI increasingly mediates decision-making about knowledge production, reproduction and distribution, it becomes a powerful actor in shaping the future of academic discourse by normalising what counts as credible research, whose work is visible, and which voices are amplified. The rapid integration of AI into academic systems raises urgent concerns about the articulation of agency, voice, and epistemic authority. Together, voice, agency, and epistemic justice provide a framework for examining not only whether Asian women academics are represented within higher education, but whether their knowledge is recognised, circulated, and institutionally valued.

Asian women academics and unequal power in higher education

Despite the significant growth of Asian students in higher education in Commonwealth countries, such as New Zealand (Education Counts, 2026), Asian women academics remain disproportionately underrepresented. Issues such as pay gaps and a lack of career progression continue to persist (Ministry for Women, 2025; Ng et al., 2025; Oishi, 2017, 2023).

Bourdieu (1988) insisted that the classic resources that one has are the cultural, the social, and the economic capital of the actors. If we account for an academic discipline as a population or as a group of actors who feed the discourse of our discipline, when you enter this discipline, the first question is how to identify the actors. Generally, in the university, an academic is recognised by teaching, publishing, and leadership. Asian women academics in Western countries, who often operate across complex contexts, may find their scholarly contributions evaluated against the dominant norms where gender and racialised issues continue to persist (Ministry for Women, 2025; Ng et al., 2025; Oishi, 2017, 2023).

Within the neoliberal economic models, education policy and evaluations have often been influenced by marketisation, privatisation, and performance-based accountability (Williamson, 2023). Fairclough's (1993) discursive concept of the marketisation of higher education explains how universities are positioned to compete in the political economy. However, the increasing use of data-driven, metrics-based evaluation risks shifting from reflective and meaningful knowledge production to meet efficiency expectations (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2025), where speed, visibility, and output are prioritised over contextual and critical knowledge. These developments are unlikely to affect all academics equally. For Asian women academics, whose participation is already shaped by gendered

and racialised inequalities, metric-driven systems may further constrain opportunities for recognition and influence.

These concerns extend into teaching and learning environments. In a technologically enhanced teaching environment, e.g., XR (extended reality) (Birt et al., 2024; Cochrane and Birt, 2025), algorithmic bias can shape who is most likely to be represented in the digital space. Because these systems are built upon existing datasets and dominant norms, they risk reproducing social stereotypes and excluding diverse communities under the appearance of technological neutrality. Despite the growing number of Asian students, the lack of Asian women scholars, thus, potentially undermines university integrity and reputation for inclusivity.

Asian women academics and artificial intelligence

In an AI-driven world, we let data show who is more important with metrics, citations, and online profiles. AI is deeply integrated within higher education strategic practices, positioning it as a powerful discursive agent.

AI is effective in quantification and datafication, but it risks undermining critical practice within higher education and raises ethical and epistemic concerns. AI technology reinforces bias by affecting forms of knowledge, manufacturing facts, and automating consensus (Färber et al., 2023). As a result, epistemic knowledge and justice may become distorted (Cronqvist, 2025). Therefore, AI should not be understood merely as a technological innovation (Pater et al., 2022), but as a social problem embedded within existing structures.

In the system of knowledge production, agentic AI systems are increasingly capable of independently conducting aspects of scientific research and generating research outputs (Yamada et al., 2025). It can autonomously achieve specific goals with limited supervision (Sarikaya, 2025). With this growing anticipation, we must ask, is our research being directed by AI-driven views? Is AI telling us what is important, and who is important?

While work on AI in higher education has broadly addressed its application in teaching and learning, a deeper understanding is needed to diagnose its impact on the construction of knowledge. Below, I explain how AI-mediated environments in higher education undermine the voice and agency of Asian women academics in academic practices.

Epistemic standardisation

AI functions as a discursive force rather than a human agent. It is a system embedded in the institutional structure. It participates in knowledge production by reinforcing structures around what knowledge looks like, creating homogeneity. Put simply, AI shapes the linguistic and epistemic forms of what becomes identifiable as legitimate academic expressions: at the lexicon level around word choices, at the syntactic level around sentence structure and at the epistemological level around argumentation. If epistemic standardisation concerns the form of knowledge, AI-mediated environments concern whether that

knowledge becomes discoverable, ranked, cited, or institutionally valued.

Generative AI systems are trained mainly on dominant English-language academic corpora (Bender et al., 2021), which privilege particular rhetorical conventions, citation practices, and forms of argumentation structures. As these systems become integrated into academic systems, they narrow acceptable academic expression. AI systematically ‘rewards’ standardised forms of academic expression within a filtering system (Färber et al., 2023); in turn, it reduces Asian women academics’ authority and space for different expressions of culturally grounded knowledge and limits different ways of knowing. For instance, Asian women academics could be the cultural authority of certain knowledge but be unable to demonstrate it because of the need to conform to certain expressions in research outputs. In the process, they may, therefore, find themselves navigating a tension between authenticity and legitimacy, conforming to dominant academic norms in order to be heard, while risking the dilution of perspectives rooted in their own cultural and lived experiences. In this way, they lose their authenticity and agency (the ability to act) and subsequently redistribute voice toward already advantaged groups by conforming to the dominant system of knowledge.

Beyond standardising forms of knowledge, metric-based evaluation systems risk flattening diverse knowledge systems by privileging dominant epistemologies (Färber et al., 2023; Williamson, 2023). AI-driven citation systems privilege already highly cited Western normative English-language scholarship, with certain concepts or worldviews, thereby reducing the discoverability and legitimacy of scholarship produced by less institutionally visible Asian women academics by systematically marginalising culturally grounded, or non-dominant epistemologies. Over time, this produces a self-reinforcing discourse in which visibility is concentrated only within well-established groups. This is not simply a matter of reduced discoverability, but a form of epistemic exclusion in which certain ways of knowing are rendered peripheral, thereby undermining epistemic justice in academia.

Furthermore, the growing use of AI-assisted tasks risks redefining what counts as timely and efficient performance in evaluating scholarly output. It alters our expectations of the speed of productivity and efficiency (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2025); it takes time to create a network, gather coauthors’ thoughts or set up a consortium. As the relational dimension is grounded in Asian culture (Cheng, 2001), the expectation of productivity by default reduces the ability for Asian women academics to engage with culturally grounded scholars, thus undermining their agency.

Algorithmic decision-making

Algorithmic decision-making in academia extends beyond publication metrics. A crucial but often overlooked activity for understanding how academic voice and agency are structured is recruitment. Institutions tend to recruit those who are already highly visible, such as scholars with established reputations and consolidated profiles within their disciplines. These individuals are more likely to secure permanent positions, prestige, and

future opportunities, reinforcing their prominence within the field.

AI-enhanced recruitment systems intensify this dynamic by using bibliometric filtering and ranking logic to automate shortlisting or recommendations (Färber et al., 2023). This means that those who are already positioned in dominant systems will be promoted because their profiles are more visible within existing algorithms, ranking systems and citation databases (Selwyn, 2022; Shrestha and Das, 2022). Under these recommendation systems, although they are disguised as ‘objective’, bias has become infrastructural and the visibility becomes self-reinforcing (Stinson, 2022).

As institutions recruit highly visible representatives of a particular knowledge formation, they leave out those less recognised contributors. In an AI-driven world, this aspect only allows voice in a limited group of actors and reinforces existing hierarchies of visibility, or rather, invisibility (Selwyn, 2022). In this light, academic voice is not simply individual expressions, rather it is selectively amplified through computational systems that reinforce pre-existing hierarchies of recognition.

Arguably, research fields are not produced by individuals alone, but emerge from collective intellectual labour. In the AI-mediated reality, Asian women academics’ labour and capacity to be recognised, cited, and included in knowledge production are further constrained as they are positioned with comparatively lower visibility within these systems, and consequently, their academic voice is diminished and their agency dispersed.

Conclusion and ways forward

‘Artificial intelligence’ seems to suggest that AI is something that we have total control over. Yet, we have seen evidence that AI is able to self-learn, e.g., artificial general intelligence (Sarikaya, 2025). This evolving nature highlights that AI is likely to transform social bias into technical infrastructure affecting human participation in knowledge production. This cautions that, as AI actively shapes policies, worldviews and ways of life, it may conflict with the equity commitments of higher education regarding inclusivity. As AI systems continue to privilege dominant forms of knowledge, they risk narrowing the diversity of voices that contribute to academic life and public debates. For countries with colonial histories, such as NZ, this is a highly sensitive issue given the country’s obligations to the Treaty of Waitangi to ensure equitable outcomes (Came et al., 2024).

AI prevalence risks compressing discursive diversity into homogeneity, which impacts epistemological standardisation, narrowing what counts as legitimate knowledge, rendering Asian women academics invisible and undermining their ways of knowing in the sphere of knowledge generation, reproduction and distribution. In data-driven environments, the absence of diverse perspectives can lead to incomplete or inaccurate interpretations, ultimately undermining informed decision-making and jeopardising the justice and autonomy of their recipients.

Despite the debates, the pressing question is ‘who has responsibility for AI?’ Since algorithms lack intentionality, professionals, institutions or governments associated with the system

should be held responsible for those biases, particularly when the bias replicates a human bias (Russ-Smith and Lazarus, 2024). Higher education institutions have a critical role to play in responding to these challenges as universities are pivotal in the production, reproduction and distribution of what counts as knowledge.

Evaluating bias is a tricky endeavour. Detecting and mitigating specific biases depend greatly on the available data. Institutions need a self-correcting mechanism that acts as an epistemic defence system. Debiasing methods should be embedded in governance structures and in all aspects of research methods and methodologies to address bias. Solutions need to transcend the existing epistemological boundary. This could be as simple as having a conversation with the software or programme provider or consulting with the target population groups.

This paper calls for institutions to create strong academic leadership and AI governance protocols to mitigate systemic mis- or under-representation of information. Diverse voices in academia, akin to the notion of biodiversity, will allow for the regeneration and expansion of knowledge. The future direction of higher education discourse should be shaped by governance and academic leadership, not technology.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

CT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. AI was used for checking grammar and structure/formatting.

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