

Digital Governance Policy in Higher Education: Where Sri Lanka Stands?

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Abstract

Digital governance has become increasingly significant in higher education, from policy-making to instructional innovation in the global context. Sri Lanka initiated the process of integrating digital governance in higher education as part of a National Digitalisation Framework. Despite the initial policy proposal, the effective implementation across higher educational institutions seems to be lagging. Thus, this study explores current trends in digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka, highlighting national strategies and attempts. Additionally, the review explored emerging challenges of the integration of digital governance, such as digital devices, and the decline in academic integrity. This study employed a qualitative comparative approach to examine the current context of integration of digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka. A systematic literature search was carried out for peer-reviewed journal articles, case studies, reviews (published in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar), policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025 using the keywords “digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka”. The available literature on digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka mostly reflects the state of policies and frameworks, and the evolution of policy development is presented in this review. A few empirical studies have been carried out on the usage of digital tools by students and educators at the institutional level. Concerns over data privacy & security, and equity in digital infrastructure & literacy have been identified as key challenges that constrained the effective integration of digital governance in higher education. This review highlights the limitations of studies conducted on the effect of digitalisation on functional aspects of governance. This review further identifies the limitations in the development of a comprehensive policy on the integration of digital governance into higher educational institutes and looks ahead to provide recommendations for developing a policy framework for digital governance strategies, emphasising the sustainability and collaboration for quality higher education.

Keywords: Digital Governance, Higher Education, Policy Framework, Review, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Digital technology has made space for integration with countries' governance frameworks. This change calls for enhanced cost-effectiveness, transparency and accountability in governance (Jia & Chen, 2022). Digital governance gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic when educational institutions worldwide were compelled to adopt digital tools for the continuation of education. Digital governance has thus become a critical area of the new educational reform and innovation (Willse, 2024).

The advancement of digital governance in education depends largely on the region, its economic and political viability and institutional preparedness. In some European Union countries, efforts are being made to standardize digital educational strategies focusing on digital inclusion (Schmoelz, 2023), while other countries, such as China, adopt a very centralised reform in order to optimise education implementation and policies (Bing, 2023). India is practising a hybrid model, which includes robust central initiatives such as the DIKSHA (One Nation, One Digital Platform) platform in addition to local strategies



(Kar, 2023). The Sri Lankan government has also kept in line with the world trend and released the National Digital Strategy Framework for Sri Lanka, leading the country towards a comprehensive digital in Government, Economy and Society, where education is a fundamental part of it. The Ministry of Education and University Grant Commission, and other players in Sri Lanka, were advised to initiate the strategic plan to collaborate with other government bodies, facilitating this transformation (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2026). The digital tools, ie, AI, data analytics and blockchain technology, are more often used in the higher educational platforms in Sri Lanka. However, certain issues such as fair distribution, ethical use and privacy of data warrant consideration. In addition, these digital instruments are very popular in instruction and learning, but educational governance has yet to embrace them. Therefore, it is both relevant and important to empirically as well as theoretically investigate digital governance in higher education. Therefore, this research attempts to give a broader picture of e-governance in higher education in Sri Lanka, covering national strategies and efforts. Finally, the review also draws attention to new challenges such as digital divides and academic integrity in digital governance implementation. This study also presents future research and policy recommendations for better integration of digital governance in higher education.

Literature Review

Digital Governance in Higher Education

The digital governance in higher education involves the strategic integration of digital technologies into planning and improving educational policy and administration. Digital governance is built on real-time data and offers dynamic feedback loops, enhancing avenues for stakeholder input (Jia & Chen, 2022). This electronic intervention ensures coordination among ministries, universities and other HEIs and stakeholders, which leads to transparency and accountability in governance (Jia & Chen, 2022). The architecture of digital governance in higher education consists of three interrelated activities: 1) digitisation, which converts manual records and processes into digital formats, 2) digitalisation, where existing pro-

cesses are restructured using digital tools to improve efficiency and coordination, and 3) digital transformation, which implies a deeper change in how educational systems function (Zhang, 2025).

Key Dimensions of Digital Governance in Higher Education

Successful implementation of digital governance into higher education depends on a few key dimensions such as governance structures, technological platforms, and digital literacy, implementation are key main dimension of digital governance in higher education (Zhang, 2025). Among these, the most important dimension is the structure of decision-making authority. Centralised models and distributed models can be adopted by the decision-making authorities depending on the circumstances. The Centralised model involves national-level coordination, which may enhance consistency and equity in resource distribution. However, in some instances, a distributed governance model might promote flexibility by delegating decision-making to regional or institutional levels (Zhang, 2025).

Digital literacy plays a major role in implementing digital governance. Both teachers and students must be able to use educational platforms, interpret data reports, and integrate digital tools into their instruction. In addition, students are expected to develop skills to navigate digital learning environments (Lee, 2014). Another key aspect of digital governance is the orientation of the implementation process. The most acceptable method would be the top-down models driven by government mandates, policy reforms, and implementation (Zhang, 2025).

Essential component of Digital Governance in Education

The focus of the implementation process is another important dimension of digital governance. The from-above models mandated by the government would be the most acceptable among policy changes and practice (Zhang, 2025). An Integral part of Digital Governance in Education, a strong model of digital governance in education rests on a few key features. Policy frameworks are needed to guide the implementation. Data infrastructure and interoperable data systems are

the foundation of digital government that supports decision-making based on evidence. Digital control also relies on platforms like analytics dashboards to support administrative processes. Complementarities include the engagement of educational institutions, technology providers and other stakeholders, vital for effective implementation of digital governance (Zhang, 2025).

Global Digital Governance in Education

The strategic direction when incorporating digital governance in education differs significantly across regions. International institutions such as UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank provide models of digital governance in education. Such international organisations offer financial, technical, and specific collaborations for developing countries to conform to the world (Zhang, 2025). Economic and political capacities are the main factors that determine the adoption of digital governance in higher education. European Union countries attempt to harmonise digital educational strategies, emphasising digital inclusion (Schmoelz, 2023). China is characterised by a centralised approach of collecting data to assess its local governments' performance against set targets, streamlining education and policy enactment (Bing, 2023). India uses a hybrid, with the central initiatives like the DIKSHA (One Nation, One Digital Platform) platform (Kar, 2023).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative approach to examine the current context of integration of digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka. This review includes the peer-reviewed journal articles, case studies, reviews (published in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar), policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025. The databases were systematically searched using keywords with Boolean operators, including "digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka", "educational technology policy in Sri Lanka", "AI in education governance in Sri Lanka", and "digital education reform in Sri Lanka".

The selected literature was analysed through thematic synthesis to understand digital inclusion in

higher education in Sri Lanka. Special attention was given to studies reflecting a strategic framework for integration of digital governance in higher education, integration of technological platforms into higher education, and the impact on undergraduates and academics of the above integration. Moreover, this review analyzed the challenges of digital governance described in the literature and strategies proposed to mitigate the challenges.

Results and Discussions

A systematic literature search noticed that available literature on digital governance in higher education in Sri Lanka reflected the state of policies and frameworks, empirical studies on the usage of digital tools by the students and educators, and the challenges associated with them. Though literature is available on the integration of digital tools into teaching and learning processes, their use in governance functions is minimal. The literature included in this study is categorized and presented as follows;

National Framework

Sri Lanka identified a technology-based education as a key national initiative in its National Policy Framework (NPF) named "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour", adopted in 2019 (Wijetilleke, 2020). Subsequently, Sri Lanka's National Digital Policy (2020-2025) was proposed, and it outlined the integration of technology across all educational sectors, detailed as "Policy for Digital Transformation of Education". It mainly follows the centralised model where the Ministry of Higher Education coordinates the framework, while it is implemented by the higher educational institute. The framework has identified 20 policy objectives and has proposed strategies to implement and overcome the challenges. This framework has assisted in capacity building and digital skill development of all stakeholders in education. The framework also highlights the identification of digital inequalities in higher educational institutions (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2026). The Ministry of Higher Education in Sri Lanka has proposed a comprehensive framework for the inclusion of digital governance in education, which is to be approved by the first quarter

of 2026 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2026). This framework also highlighted the collaboration among all stakeholders to enhance educational outcomes. Especially, the University Grants Commission plays a vital role in the implementation of digital governance. (University Grant Commission, 2026).

Evidence for integration of digital tools into higher education: Local adaptations

A greater majority of studies have investigated the usage of AI tools by the undergraduates of Sri Lanka. Studies have found that both educators and students are aware of and use emerging AI tools (Perera, Perera, & Dissanayake, 2025). Among the digital tools, GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, QuillBot, and Google Bard are most frequently used in higher educational institutes for teaching, learning as well as other administrative work (Fairouz, Jayasundara, & Udara, 2023). Among them, ChatGPT is the AI tool with the highest usage among undergraduates (Aflal et al., 2024).

Studies that explored the student's perception as their perspectives about AI are crucial for the inclusion of digital governance in higher education. Studies have shown that students consider that AI tools are an essential tool for undergraduate students' success (Ediriweera, 2024). In agreement with their perceptions, a parallel study provides evidence to support that integration of AI would provide more innovative and effective learning experiences for undergraduates (Nawarathne, Thayasivam, & Dayarathne, 2025). Nishshanka and coworkers have identified a few factors, such as academic work, awareness and adoption, challenges, and risk, as main influencers of the adoption and usage of AI tools by the Sri Lankan undergraduates (Nishshanka et al., 2025). Hence, comprehensive policies and guidelines have to be introduced at the university level to overcome the main challenges associated with integrating GenAI tools, such as uncertainty of reliability and resistance to embracing technological advancements (Henadirage & Gunarathne, 2025).

Challenges

The digital divide is a significant challenge in the implementation of digital governance in higher education. While digital technologies can improve the learning and governance in higher education it also risk inequality. Rural areas in the country should be equipped with high-speed internet, digital devices, and other technologies to reduce disparity.

In addition, academic integrity and authenticity have been gravely challenged by the inclusion of digital tools for learning. A comprehensive education framework should propose the integration of digital tools into teaching and learning to enhance integrity and accountability. Data privacy and security are the other most pressing challenges associated with digital governance. Moreover, robust cybersecurity protocols should be implemented to ensure data protection (Henadirage & Gunarathne, 2025).

Lack of awareness and digital incompetence among all educational stakeholders is another challenge that hinders the effective integration of digital governance into higher education. This review highlights the investment in capacity building of all stakeholders in higher education on AI technologies, improving the quality of the interface, and support for the integration of AI technologies (Weerapperuma, Nawinna, & Gamage, 2024).

Future direction

While digital governance progresses in higher education in Sri Lanka, it is worthwhile to assess whether it is sustainable, adaptive, resilient, and environmentally equitable. Creating green technologies in digital infrastructures and promoting more energy-efficient and eco-friendly digital infrastructures to ensure the environmental sustainability of this transformation (Zhang, 2025). It is an opportunity to compare digital governance models in different parts of the world and learn best practices that could be used for implementation in Sri Lanka. Overall, this study proposes a systemic approach, which includes digital infrastructure enhancement and stakeholder cooperation as well as sustainable operation, which are indispensable for optimising the effect of digital governance in higher education.

Conclusion

This review indicates that, although a National Digital Policy has been developed, there is limited evidence of practical implementation, mainly at the level of governance function. Most of the case studies have been carried out at the institutional level about the feasibility of inclusion of digital tools for teaching and learning, and identification of associated challenges. The comprehensive literature search carried out in this study highlights the limitations of comprehensive policy documents on the integration of digital technology into the governance of the higher education system in Sri Lanka. Hence, collectively, this study warrants further empirical research and the preparation of a comprehensive policy framework for the integration of digital technology into the governance of higher education.

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