

The Transformation of Higher Education in the Era of Artificial Intelligence Assistants: From Knowledge Transmission to Leadership Cultivation

Li Sun¹, Tao Su²

^{1&2}SoftwareSchool, Harbin Information Engineering Institute
Corresponding Author Email: hxcisutao2020@126.com

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Abstract

The rise of artificial intelligence assistants is reshaping higher education, calling for innovative changes in the leadership cultivation paradigm. This paper focuses on the issue of leadership cultivation in higher education in the era of AI assistants and creatively proposes the concept of a "personal think tank," which refers to a cross-disciplinary team of AI assistants available to everyone. This concept disrupts the traditional human-machine relationship, signifying a shift in leadership from personal capability to human-machine collaborative capability. This paper explores how AI assistants are driving a fundamental shift in the educational paradigm, transitioning from traditional knowledge transmission to the cultivation of leadership and innovative capabilities. Through a comprehensive review of literature and theoretical analysis, this study highlights the transformative trends and pathways in leadership cultivation prompted by AI assistants. The integration of AI assistants in higher education necessitates a student-centered approach, interdisciplinary integration, and an industry-academia-research education mechanism. These changes are crucial for fostering innovative leadership and preparing students for the AI era. The study underscores the urgency for universities to adapt their educational philosophies, update teaching content, and innovate methods to remain competitive and fulfill their role in national talent development. By leveraging AI technology to optimize management processes and enhance organizational efficiency, higher education can evolve into an empowering, platform-based, and ecosystem-oriented paradigm. This transformation is essential for higher education to thrive and contribute to the dual goals of building a strong nation in higher education and talent development.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence Assistants, Higher Education, Educational Transformation, Leadership, Personal Think Tank

Introduction

In recent years, large language model AI (Artificial Intelligence) assistants, exemplified by ChatGPT have rapidly emerged, demonstrating immense potential in the realm of knowledge services. These intelligent assistants engage in natural and fluent interactions with humans, providing specialized knowledge across multiple fields and significantly enhancing the efficiency and quality of knowledge work. The widespread application of AI assistants is reshaping people's work and lifestyles, exerting profound impacts on education, the economy, society, and various other domains. The release of OpenAI's new multimodal AI assistant GPT-4o in May 2024 marks a new phase for AI assistants, breaking boundaries of perception and cognition, and achieving real-time interaction and response across text, voice, and vision. GPT-4o, in the form of a "personal think tank," collaborates with individuals, sparking revolutionary changes in human-machine relationships and accelerating AI-driven transformations. To clearly illustrate the development trajectory of AI assistants, this paper presents a timeline of key milestones and significant events leading up to the release of OpenAI's new multimodal AI assistant GPT-4o in May 2024 (Figure 1).

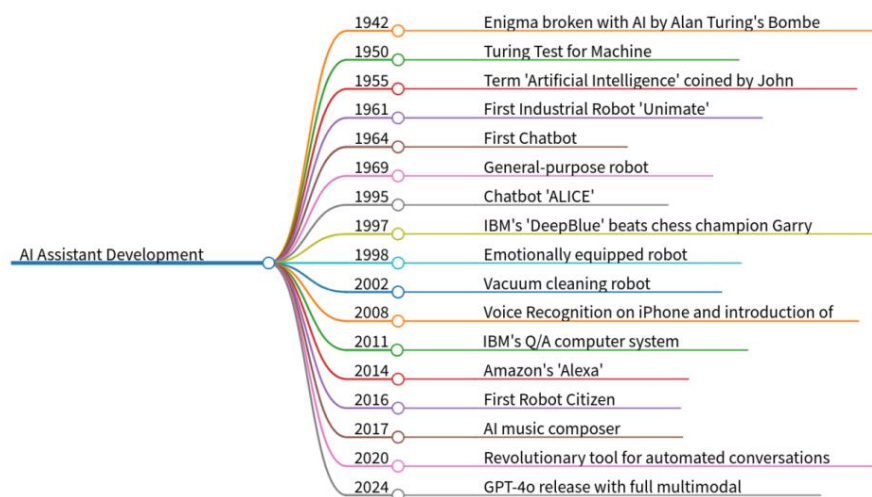


Figure 1. Timeline of AI Assistant Development

The rise of AI assistants, particularly disruptive technologies like GPT-4o, presents unprecedented opportunities and challenges for higher education. The decreasing cost and barriers to knowledge acquisition challenge the traditional "teacher-centered" model of knowledge transmission. This study explores how higher education can proactively adapt to and lead the transformation driven by AI assistants, shifting the goals of talent cultivation from knowledge transmission to leadership cultivation. This study focuses on the transformation in higher education prompted by AI assistants, bearing significant theoretical and practical implications. It aims to enrich the understanding of leadership connotations and paradigm shifts in higher education, providing systematic conceptual explanations for leadership cultivation in universities, thus aiding in the construction of an innovative talent cultivation system that meets the demands of the AI era.

Literature Review

To clarify the research background and consolidate existing knowledge, this study extensively reviewed a vast array of literature across multiple fields, including AI assistants, leadership, and educational transformation. In the realm of AI assistant research, scholars agree that

intelligent assistants are becoming transformative forces reshaping production and lifestyle [1]. Studies indicate that AI assistants are becoming essential tools for individuals and organizations, significantly impacting human cognition and decision-making processes with their extensive knowledge bases, real-time interaction capabilities and multimodal presentation methods [2]. Jia et al. [3] highlights the immense application prospects of AI assistants in education, potentially revitalizing teaching and learning. However, the rapid development of AI assistants also poses challenges to existing educational systems, necessitating proactive changes to adapt to the AI era.

The evolution of leadership theories in Western academia has transitioned from trait theory to behavioral theory and then to contingency theory [4]. Recently, new leadership theories like transformational and servant leadership have gained attention [5], with Benitez et al. [6] suggesting that the connotations of leadership in the intelligent era are transforming, emphasizing digital and innovative leadership. Despite this, there is a lack of systematic research exploring the paradigm shift in leadership prompted by AI assistants.

Educational transformation theories provide insights into how higher education should respond to the challenges posed by AI assistants, advocating for a learner-centered paradigm shift and the integration of "education + technology" [7]. However, existing research lacks a systematic examination of the transformation in higher education talent cultivation from the perspective of AI assistants. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on leadership innovations prompted by AI assistants, analyzing their disruptive impact on higher education, and exploring strategies for higher education to respond and transform, achieving theoretical innovation and practical enlightenment.

Research Method

This study employs a comprehensive approach integrating theoretical analysis, literature review and comparative research methods to explore the transformative trends and pathways in leadership cultivation in higher education in the era of AI assistants from multiple dimensions and perspectives.

Theoretical Analysis Method

By leveraging perspectives from education, management and AI, the study delves into the transformation logic of leadership connotations in the AI assistant era. It examines the paradigm shift in leadership cultivation in higher education within the context of the evolution of leadership theories. This study clarifies core concepts, constructs the research framework and provides theoretical support for exploring leadership cultivation with AI assistants.

Literature Review Method

Through a systematic review of relevant domestic and international literature, the study captures the forefront dynamics of AI assistant development, leadership theory evolution, and higher education transformation. By critically inheriting the achievements of previous research, the study refines the research questions, accurately positioning the points of academic innovation, thereby solidifying the theoretical foundation of the research.

Comparative Research Method

The study seeks to clarify the similarities and differences in AI assistant-driven educational transformations across different countries and stages through comparison. It aims to summarize cross-contextual and cross-stage regularities, thereby distilling universally applicable theoretical insights and practical pathways.

Discussion

The Transformation of Leadership Connotations in the Era of AI Assistants

The rapid development of AI assistants is revolutionizing traditional human-machine relationships and knowledge production methods. This paper introduces the concept of a "Personal Think Tank," a virtual team of AI assistants from various fields that individuals possess. These AI assistants provide real-time, comprehensive decision support, functioning as an individual's "second brain". The Decision and Innovation Process Diagram of the Personal Think Tank (Figure 2) illustrates the roles and processes of the personal think tank in decision-making and innovation. The "Personal Think Tank" signifies a shift in leadership from personal capability to human-machine collaborative capability and from knowledge-based to intelligence-based. The core of leadership now focuses on integrating and driving cross-field AI assistants to achieve human-machine collaborative innovation [8].

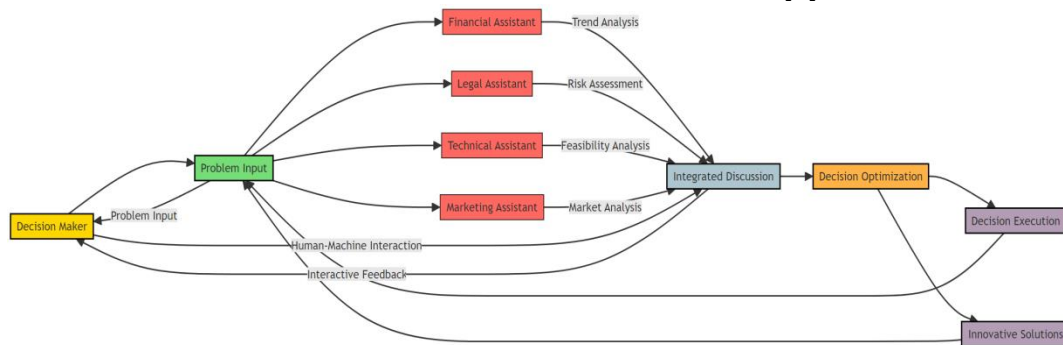


Figure 2. Decision and Innovation Process Diagram of the Personal Think Tank

Core of New Era Leadership: Human-Machine Collaborative Innovation

Within the context of the "Personal Think Tank," the connotation of leadership undergoes a fundamental transformation. Traditional leadership emphasizes the personal charisma and influence of the leader, whereas the core of new era leadership lies in the ability for human-machine collaborative innovation [9]. Human-machine collaborative innovation refers to the continuous interaction between humans and AI assistants in problem definition, solution generation, and decision optimization. Leaders need to understand the principles of human-machine complementarity, construct organizational processes and innovation mechanisms for human-machine collaboration, foster a data-driven and open organizational culture. Human-machine collaborative innovation capability becomes a new dimension for measuring leadership.

Paradigm Shift in Leadership: From Knowledge to Wisdom, From Management to Governance

The impact of AI assistants extends beyond transforming leadership connotations to creating a profound paradigm shift in leadership. Specifically, leadership is evolving from a knowledge-based to an intelligence-based approach and from management to governance [10]. With declining costs of knowledge acquisition, mere possession of knowledge is no longer a leader's

core advantage. Instead, the ability to convert vast knowledge into actionable insights and wisdom is crucial. Wisdom-oriented leadership emphasizes multidimensional thinking, critical questioning, and value-driven guidance. The shift from management to governance marks an elevation in the leadership paradigm, moving from standardized control to vision-led guidance, empowerment, and continuous learning. In the complex and variable intelligent era, an inclusive, coordinated, and diverse governance paradigm is imperative. The comparative diagram of traditional leadership and AI assistant leadership (Figure 3) illustrates the differences in knowledge acquisition, decision-making methods, and intelligent thinking, showcasing the distinct characteristics and evolving trends of these paradigms.



Figure 3. Comparative Diagram of Traditional Leadership and AI Assistant Leadership

Table 1 provides a detailed comparison of traditional leadership and AI assistant era leadership across six key dimensions.

Table 1

Comparative Table of Traditional Leadership and AI Assistant Era Leadership

Leadership Dimension	Traditional Leadership	AI Assistant Era Leadership
Knowledge Source	Personal Experience and Learning	Human-Machine Interaction and Continuous Learning
Decision-Making Mode	Reliance on Personal Judgment	Human-Machine Collaborative Optimization
Problem-Solving Approach	Limited by Personal Perspective	Multi-Agent Integrated Analysis
Innovation Method	Primarily Individual Thinking	Human-Machine Hybrid Innovation
Team Collaboration	Interpersonal Communication and Coordination	Human-Machine Task Allocation and Collaboration
Environmental Adaptation	Incremental Adjustments	Real-Time Sensing and Dynamic Optimization

The Necessity and Urgency of Transforming Leadership Cultivation in Higher Education

Justification for the Necessity of Transforming Leadership Cultivation in Higher Education

The transformation of leadership cultivation in higher education is becoming increasingly important due to the opportunities and challenges posed by AI assistants [11]. Adapting to the needs of the AI era requires universities to shift their educational philosophies, update teaching content and innovate teaching methods to lead educational reform. Enhancing talent quality necessitates integrating leadership cultivation into the talent development process, focusing not only on knowledge transmission but also on key capabilities such as leadership, innovation, and adaptability. This comprehensive improvement involves coordinated efforts across professional knowledge, practical skills, and humanistic literacy. From a national strategy perspective, leadership cultivation is vital for universities to foster globally competitive AI leaders and innovative teams. Artificial intelligence, as a strategic technology, is crucial for national competitiveness and sustainable development. Thus, universities must align with the national AI strategy, providing comprehensive training in AI knowledge and practical abilities to create exceptional talents.

Analysis of the Urgency for Transforming Leadership Cultivation

The transformation of leadership cultivation in higher education is urgently needed due to significant shortcomings and pressing issues. Universities' understanding of AI assistants remains inadequate, with outdated concepts and slow actions. As of 2024, less than 30% of Chinese universities offer AI-related courses, and even fewer focus on leadership in the context of AI assistants. Many universities are still in an observational phase, lacking strategic integration of AI into talent cultivation. Current leadership courses are scattered, theoretical, and lack practical training, while faculty often lack interdisciplinary backgrounds and practical experience. Evaluation systems are overly simplistic, hindering effective assessment of leadership skills. Externally, societal demand for innovative leaders is increasing, with 77% of corporate executives in 2022 identifying leadership as a critical skill gap in graduates [12]. AI technology is reshaping corporate management and talent development, necessitating stronger data analysis and decision-making capabilities in leaders. Companies like DDI are already using AI for leadership training, posing additional pressure on universities. Globally, institutions like Stanford and Nanyang Technological University are integrating AI into education, setting benchmarks for reform. Universities must promptly adjust their talent cultivation models to meet AI era demands, maintaining competitiveness and contributing to the national talent pool. Adopting a strategic approach to leadership cultivation will enable students to navigate AI and lead future developments, fulfilling the mission of higher education in the AI era.

The Core Essentials of the Transformation from Knowledge Transmission to Leadership Development

The transition in higher education from mere knowledge transmission to leadership cultivation represents a profound educational revolution, necessitating the grasp of three core essentials. First, universities must adhere to a student-centered approach, promoting comprehensive and individualized development by respecting individual differences, catering to diverse needs, and providing an autonomous, open, and flexible learning ecosystem. Second, leadership as a composite, cross-domain capability requires both disciplinary knowledge and general education. Universities should dismantle disciplinary silos to integrate various fields, forming a "leadership + specialization" model for nurturing composite talents. Third, practical exercise and experience are crucial for leadership enhancement. Universities should engage with

industries and research institutions to build a collaborative education platform that merges education with industry and science, using project-based practice, case studies, and situational simulations. Leveraging AI assistants to connect students with industry experts and mentors can broaden horizons and inspire innovative thinking. This transformation signifies a systemic and holistic reform of educational philosophies, content, methods, and evaluation. Recognizing the significance of this transition and accurately grasping its core essentials will allow universities to explore new, results-oriented pathways for talent development, providing a "Chinese solution" for higher education reform in the AI era.

Paradigm Shift in Higher Education: From Knowledge Transmission to Empowerment, Platformization, and Ecological Innovation Leadership

In the era of AI assistants, the paradigm of talent cultivation in higher education will undergo a fundamental shift from knowledge transmission to the cultivation of abilities and character. The traditional "teacher-centered" model is inadequate for the demands of the intelligent era, necessitating a transition to "learner-centered" education, interactive experiences, and an open ecosystem [13]. Universities must become enablers of student growth, providing personalized and intelligent learning support through AI assistants to achieve precise teaching and adaptive learning. This includes offering a wealth of course resources, practical platforms, and international exchange opportunities to foster intrinsic motivation and lifelong learning. Furthermore, universities will evolve from single-function teaching institutions to open platforms for cultivating innovative leadership, collaborating with tech enterprises and research institutions to integrate industry and education. Students will engage in internships and research projects with AI assistants, enhancing their leadership skills through real-world scenarios. Higher education must also transition from hierarchical management models to intelligent ecological organizations, fostering open and inclusive cultures that encourage innovation. AI technology will optimize management processes, enhance organizational efficiency, and support robust systems for innovation and entrepreneurship, stimulating the creative vitality of faculty and students. This systemic transformation from knowledge transmission to empowerment, from closed institutions to open platforms, and from hierarchical to ecological organizations is essential for higher education to thrive and rejuvenate in the AI era [14].

Conclusion

This study envisions a new landscape for higher education development driven by AI assistants. Higher education will accelerate its transformation towards an "empowering, platform-based, and ecosystem-oriented" paradigm. Universities will evolve from ivory towers into open, collaborative innovation platforms; teachers will transition from knowledge disseminators to leadership shapers; and students will grow from passive receivers to innovation leaders. These transformations introduce new concepts, pathways, and missions for higher education development, providing sustained impetus for cultivating pioneering and innovative talents in the AI era. In conclusion, faced with epochal changes triggered by AI assistants, higher education stands at a critical juncture from quantitative to qualitative transformation. By embracing the historical responsibility of "seizing new opportunities and creating new scenarios," accelerating the shift from knowledge-centric to capability-centric education, from specialized to generalist training, and from adaptive service to leading innovation, higher education can cultivate the fertile ground for "hardcore" leadership development. This will enable higher education to seize opportunities amidst crises, create

new scenarios amidst changes, and contribute to the dual goals of building a strong nation in higher education and talent development.

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