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# Techno-nationalist futures: a comparative study of AI policy and national imaginaries in higher education

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**Abstract –** In this paper, we explore how governments in four distinct national contexts—China, the United States, the Gulf States (United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia) and Pakistan—use narratives of artificial intelligence (AI) development to construct new national imaginaries through higher education policy. The paper draws on the theoretical frameworks of future imaginaries, nationalism studies, the sociology of higher education, and geopolitical analyses of AI and the knowledge economy to argue that AI is not only a technological tool being introduced to university systems but also a discursive vehicle through which states project, legitimate, and mobilise particular visions of national futures. The paper conceptually synthesises techno-nationalist future imaginaries, based on the governance typology of Kaya-Kasikci et al. and Marginson's 'glonacal' heuristic. This paper is a theoretically novel synthesis that brings out the ideological and temporal dimensions of AI-driven higher education policy, which are not fully addressed in current governance frameworks. A comparative analysis of national AI policy documents using a critical discourse analysis in three analytical dimensions shows that, contrary to globalisation theses on institutional isomorphism, AI is basically promoting national divergence of higher education rather than its homogenisation. The findings indicate that the current discursive moment in AI education policy is perhaps best understood not as convergence but as a proliferation of nationally specific techno-nationalist futures.
**Keywords:** AI and higher education. Comparative education. Critical discourse analysis. Future imaginaries. Techno-nationalism.

## Futuros tecnonacionalistas: um estudo comparativo da política de IA e dos imaginários nacionais no ensino superior

**Resumo** – Neste artigo, exploramos como governos em quatro contextos nacionais distintos – China, Estados Unidos, Estados do Golfo (Emirados Árabes Unidos e Arábia Saudita) e Paquistão – utilizam narrativas sobre o desenvolvimento da inteligência artificial (IA) para construir novos imaginários nacionais por meio de políticas de ensino superior. O artigo se baseia nos referenciais teóricos dos imaginários futuros, dos estudos sobre nacionalismo, da sociologia do ensino superior e das análises geopolíticas da IA e da economia do conhecimento para argumentar que a IA não é apenas uma ferramenta tecnológica que está sendo introduzida nos sistemas universitários, mas também um veículo discursivo por meio do qual os Estados projetam, legitimam e mobilizam visões específicas de futuros nacionais. O

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artigo sintetiza conceitualmente imaginários futuros tecnonacionalistas, com base na tipologia de governança de Kaya-Kasikci et al. e na heurística "glonacal" de Marginson. Este artigo representa uma síntese teoricamente inovadora que destaca as dimensões ideológica e temporal das políticas de ensino superior impulsionadas pela IA, que não são totalmente abordadas nos atuais referenciais de governança. Uma análise comparativa de documentos de políticas nacionais de IA utilizando uma análise crítica do discurso em três dimensões analíticas, demonstra que, ao contrário das teses de globalização sobre isomorfismo institucional, a IA está, na verdade, promovendo a divergência nacional do ensino superior, em vez de sua homogeneização. Os resultados indicam que o atual momento discursivo na política educacional de IA talvez seja melhor compreendido não como convergência, mas como uma proliferação de futuros tecnonacionalistas específicos de cada país.
**Palavras-chave:** Análise crítica do discurso. Educação comparada. Inteligência artificial e ensino superior. Imaginários futuros. Tecnonacionalismo.

**Futuros tecnonacionalistas: un estudio comparativo de las políticas de IA y los imaginarios nacionales en la educación superior**

**Resumen** – En este artículo exploramos cómo los gobiernos de cuatro contextos nacionales distintos —China, Estados Unidos, los Estados del Golfo (Emiratos Árabes Unidos y Arabia Saudita) y Pakistán— utilizan narrativas sobre el desarrollo de la inteligencia artificial (IA) para construir nuevos imaginarios nacionales a través de las políticas de educación superior. El artículo se basa en los marcos teóricos de los imaginarios futuros, los estudios sobre el nacionalismo, la sociología de la educación superior y los análisis geopolíticos de la IA y la economía del conocimiento para argumentar que la IA no es solo una herramienta tecnológica que se introduce en los sistemas universitarios, sino también un vehículo discursivo mediante el cual los Estados proyectan, legitiman y movilizan visiones específicas de futuro nacionales. El artículo sintetiza conceptualmente los imaginarios futuros tecnonacionalistas, basándose en la tipología de gobernanza de Kaya-Kasikci et al. y la heurística «glonacal» de Marginson. Este artículo constituye una síntesis teóricamente innovadora que destaca las dimensiones ideológicas y temporales de las políticas de educación superior impulsadas por la IA, las cuales no se abordan completamente en los marcos de gobernanza actuales. Un análisis comparativo de documentos de políticas nacionales de IA, utilizando un análisis crítico del discurso en tres dimensiones analíticas, demuestra que, contrariamente a las tesis de la globalización sobre el isomorfismo institucional, la IA está, en realidad, promoviendo la divergencia nacional de la educación superior en lugar de su homogeneización. Los hallazgos indican que el momento discursivo actual en la política educativa de IA se comprende mejor no como una convergencia, sino como una proliferación de futuros tecnonacionalistas específicos de cada país.
**Palabras clave:** Análisis crítico del discurso. Educación comparada. Inteligencia artificial y educación superior. Imaginarios futuros. Tecnonacionalismo.

## 1. Introduction

Something has changed in the political economy of higher education that existing frameworks have been slow to name. All over the world, governments are pouring previously unseen resources into AI curricula, AI-specific research institutes, and technology-connected workforce pipelines, not just as pragmatic responses to labour

market demands but also as deliberate acts of national identity-making. The deceptively simple question that propels this paper is, 'When a government remakes its universities around AI, what kind of future does it see, and for whom?' The paper argues that the answer is always a nationalist one even though the content and character of that nationalism vary in ways that existing comparative education scholarship has yet to adequately theorise.

Over the last decade, there has been an extraordinary convergence in ambition in policy across very disparate political systems. The State Council's 2017 New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan set a target of world-leading AI innovation by 2030 and cascaded its imperatives down through the university system with notable speed. The United States, in explicit recognition of the strategic threat posed by Chinese technological advances, responded with the CHIPS and Science Act (2022), committing over $100 billion to scientific research and workforce development. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 identified AI as one of seven core pillars for national economic transformation, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) revealed its National Strategy for Higher Education 2030. In July 2025, Pakistan approved its National AI Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2025), which aims to train one million AI professionals by 2030, acknowledging the different and more acute developmental pressures faced by the country. These are all policy moves that matter. All of these add up to something more: a new chapter in the long, tangled story of universities and national aspiration.

However, within the scholarship of higher education, the integration of AI has been mainly regarded as a technocratic problem: a question of curriculum design, employability, or the management of academic integrity in an age of generative systems (Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Even the more critical literature on AI and education tends to focus on pedagogical effects, institutional responses to policy mandates, or the ethical dimensions of algorithmic systems (Selwyn, 2019). However, far less analytical attention has been devoted to the ideological and nationalist dimension of AI education policy, namely, how governments embed visions of the national future in the very structures of AI-driven higher education reform. That gap is addressed in this paper.

There is a growing body of comparative work on AI and higher education policy that has started to shed light on the governance dimension of this phenomenon. A recent major contribution by Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025) presents a four-dimensional analytical framework that maps the positioning of universities within national AI strategies of eight major global actors, identifying what they term distinct "governance typologies" and arguing that universities are becoming strategic assets in an era of "technological statecraft". Similarly, Yang et al. (2026) compare AI higher education strategies in China, Japan and South Korea through corpus-based policy analysis, revealing different national governance logics underneath a common technological ambition. Zhu et al. (2025) extend this analysis to the geopolitical dynamics of cross-border higher education cooperation, showing how techno-nationalism, expressed through semiconductor export controls, data sovereignty disputes and conflicting algorithmic values, is reshaping the global knowledge economy.

The present paper builds on, and departs from, these contributions in a specific and theoretically productive way. Whereas Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025) foreground governance typologies and institutional positioning and Yang et al. (2026) prioritise policy text as data, this paper argues that what is most analytically revealing about national AI-education policy is not its governance architecture but its ideological and temporal work: the futures it projects nationally, the citizen-subjects it constructs, and

the nationalist legitimising narratives it deploys. This analysis is the contribution of the techno-nationalist future imaginary framework introduced here, based on the recent and theoretically important special issue on higher education, nation-building and future imaginaries edited by Schildermans and Tröhler (2025).

Methodologically, the paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) of national AI policy documents across four cases. The paper is theoretically informed by Koselleck's (2004) theory of historical time, Andersson's (2018) futurology analysis, Anderson's (1983/2006) imagined communities, Gellner's (1983/2006) modernisation thesis, Delanty's (2001) typology of university functions and Marginson's (2022b) glonacal agency heuristic, which the paper both extends and challenges in ways set out in Section 2.

The inquiry is guided by three research questions. First, how are national AI strategies constructing discourses of national futures through higher education policy? Second, what types of national imaginaries are mobilised, and how do these differ across China, the United States, the Gulf States and Pakistan? Third, how much are universities passive receptors or active negotiators of these AI-nationalist futures?

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the theoretical framework. The methodology and analytical procedure are described in Section 3. The case studies are presented in Section 4. Cross-case comparative analysis is provided in Section 5 and end of Section 6.

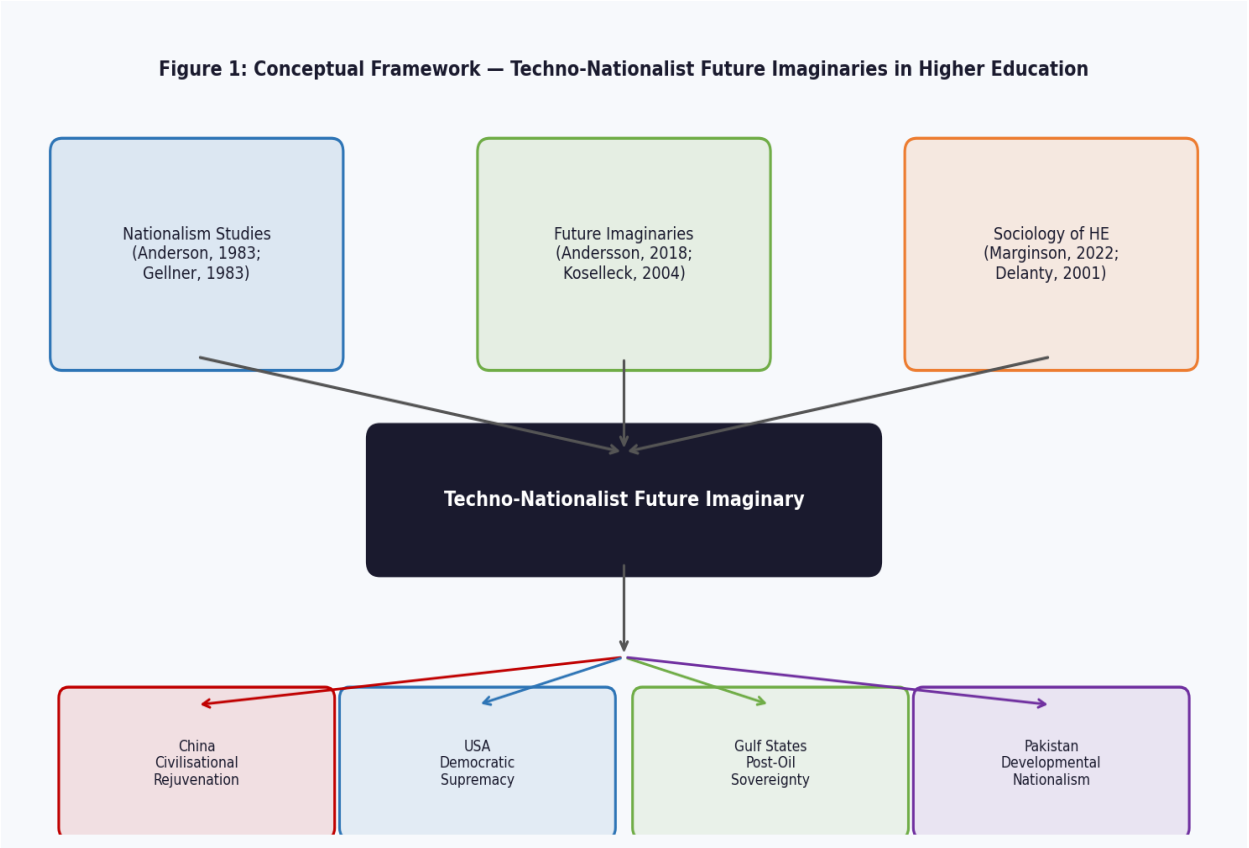
## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Future Imaginaries and Higher Education

The concept of future imaginaries, developed within futures studies and subsequently applied to the sociology of education, offers a more analytically rigorous vocabulary for approaching the relationship between policy, power, and projected futures than was possible within other frameworks. Koselleck's (2004) seminal distinction between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation shows that historical actors are shaped by accumulated pasts and oriented toward projected futures simultaneously and that the relationship between these two temporal horizons is not neutral but politically produced. In this reading, imagined futures are instruments of power: they mold the present by making some trajectories inevitable, others impossible, and yet others urgently necessary. More generally, the historical review of futurology by Andersson (2018) exemplifies how the practice of imagining the future has been institutionalized, contested, and co-opted most recently by market logic and national security discourse in roughly equal measure.

Loudoun and Van Ruyskensvelde (2025) take this insight directly to education policy, arguing that imagined futures are mobilized not simply to anticipate change but to govern the present they are instruments of power, not neutral horizons. Elfert and Ydesen (2024) extend this analysis by characterizing such policy discourse as promissory: looking towards futures that are partly constitutive of the political authority they seem merely to describe. In this sense, the promises embedded in national AI strategies are performative: they do not merely forecast what universities will become, but they mobilize the resources and institutional changes that push those predictions closer to reality. Higher education has traditionally been the main institutional medium to realize future imaginaries of the nation (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2025).

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework Techno-Nationalist Future Imaginaries in Higher Education. Note. Arrows indicate theoretical convergence toward the central concept; lower boxes represent four empirical cases.




## 2.2 The Glonacal Heuristic and Its Limits

Any assertion that national contexts continue to shape higher education must engage with Simon Marginson's (2022b) glonacal agency heuristic, the most sophisticated framework currently available for theorising the copresence and interaction of local, national and global scales in higher education. "None have permanent primacy," argues Marginson. Increasing global activity, but also the importance of the nation-state in policy, regulation and funding and the constant remaking of the local scale. Importantly, the glonacal framework already predicts that the national does not disappear under globalisation; national and global scales coexist, and agents in higher education are continuously mixing and matching them. The framework thus provides the theoretical basis on which the anti-isomorphism argument of this paper can rest: the persistence of national difference is not an empirical finding that would surprise a global reading.

However, precisely because of its focus on space and scale, the glonacal heuristic fails to account for the temporal and ideological aspects of the active construction and legitimation of national scales through policy discourse. Within the global framework, scales are seen as relatively stable features of the social landscape in which agents move; they are not examined as discursive constructions that are politically made and remade through specific nationalist narratives. This phenomenon is precisely what Shahjahan et al. (2022), writing in the target journal, describe as "methodological nationalism", the tendency to regard the nation-state as a naturalised container, rather than as an object of critical analysis. Their argument utilises affect theory to demonstrate how the nation-state "comes into being" and "becomes sticky" through imagined encounters and policy enactments, rather than being pre-given. This

paper proposes a concept of techno-nationalist future imaginaries that extends both Marginson's glonacal framework and Shahjahan et al.'s critique of methodological nationalism, providing a theoretically specified account of how AI education policy discursively constructs the national at a particular historical moment, one where technological competition has become the primary terrain on which national futures are projected, contested and legitimated.

### 2.3 Nationalism, Nation-Building, and the University

The modern university's relationship to the nation-state is historical and structural (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2025). Anderson's (1983/2006) theory of the nation as an imagined community, held together not through face-to-face interaction but through shared symbolic practices and common imaginaries, is directly relevant here. Universities have historically been among the primary institutional spaces in which national imaginaries are produced, disseminated and contested. Gellner (1983/2006) provides a complementary narrative, emphasising the role of standardised, high-culture education systems in forging the shared linguistic and cultural competencies that modern industrial economies need and that nation-states depend on for cohesion and legitimacy.

Delanty (2001) identifies three classical functions through which universities have served nation-building projects: the training of professional elites for state administration, the embedding of scientific research in service of national economic and military progress, and the cultivation of national identity through the humanities, history, and literary canons. A naïve reading might suggest that AI-driven higher education reform simply intensifies Delanty's second function of scientific research in service of national progress, leaving the overall typology intact. This paper, however, argues that AI-driven reform does something categorically different. It combines and reconfigures all three functions into a new synthesis. National AI education policy can no longer be understood as separate activities of administrative training, scientific research and identity formation: they have collapsed into a single project of producing the AI-literate, nationally loyal, technologically capable citizen subject. This approach is what China's ideological-political education programmes do when they train for AI competence and national consciousness at the same time and what Pakistan's developmental nationalism does when it presents AI training as an economic, civic and identity-forming project at the same time. What is different about this moment is not that AI is a fourth function but that it is the vehicle through which the other three are reconfigured as a unified national project in ways that none of them did individually ever before.

### 2.4 Techno-Nationalism as an Analytical Concept

The notion of techno-nationalism has existed in political economy and international relations for a few decades (Weiss, 2005), but its application in higher education policy has been underdeveloped until very recently. The concept usually indicates the intersection of national identity, state policy, and technological development the notion that a country's technological potential is significant not only economically but also essential to its sovereignty, cultural prestige, and global standing (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). This analysis has been recently extended to higher education by Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025), who describe the "technological statecraft" of universities as they are being systematically repositioned as strategic assets within national AI ecosystems, with different governance typologies delineating market-led, state-directed, and pluralist models. Their framework constitutes an important advance. Yet by focusing mainly on governance structures the institutional means by which states position universities it largely leaves unexamined what futures are being

imagined through these governance arrangements and whose nationalism is being articulated. This is the very gap that the future imaginaries framework aims to address. The concept of techno-nationalist future imaginaries developed in the present paper goes beyond typologies of governance to explore the ideological content of the national futures imagined through AI education policy, that is, the historically specific stories of destiny, sovereignty, modernity, and citizenship through which AI is endowed with its nationalist meaning in each context.

Similarly, Shan et al. (2024) draw on the concept of a “techno-cultural imaginary” to examine the integration of virtual reality technology into Chinese humanities education, arguing that the convergence of STEM and humanities in the New Humanities Education reform serves the cause of national rejuvenation. Their work is the closest existing precursor to the concept developed here and confirms that the imaginary dimension of techno-nationalism in Chinese higher education is both real and analytically significant. This paper develops this insight comparatively across four national contexts and situates it within a broader theoretical framework, including governance (following Kaya-Kasikci et al.) and discourse (following Fairclough, 2003; Shan et al., 2024).

Techno-nationalism differs from previous nationalist mobilizations of the university in terms of its temporal orientation. While nation-building projects in the nineteenth century mobilized the past national history, shared culture, and common memory as the basis of identity techno-nationalist projects mobilize the future, specifically the promise of technological leadership, as the primary legitimizing narrative. Universities are central to techno-nationalist projects, as they are the key institutions that can produce both the research and the human capital that national AI ambitions require (Douglass, 2021).

### 2.5 Educationalization Revisited

The term 'educationalization' was coined by Depaepe and Smeyers (2008) to designate the recurrent modern trend of attributing to education the task of solving problems (economic, social, and moral) that emerge outside the educational system. This idea is highly relevant today, as states are effectively educationalizing the anxiety surrounding AI. The fears of technological dependence, of economic obsolescence, and of geopolitical marginalisation are structural features of a world in which AI development is concentrated in a handful of powerful actors – and are being directed at universities as the institutions expected to resolve them. The paradox of educationalization identified by Depaepe and Smeyers, where educational systems are simultaneously politically authoritative and accountable for outcomes that they do not fully control, is acutely visible in AI education policy across all four cases examined in this paper.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

The paper adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design based on the tradition of comparative education research that emphasises contextual, historically grounded analysis rather than the search for universal laws (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025; Tröhler, 2023). The four cases were selected on the basis of theoretical variation (but not representativeness), namely China, the United States, the Gulf States (discussed as a theoretically justified paired case, see Section 3.4), and Pakistan. These are different political systems (authoritarian single-party, liberal-democratic, monarchical-developmental, and parliamentary-developmental), different levels of economic development, different positions in the global geopolitical order, and significantly

different histories of state-university relations. This variation is analytically productive because it allows the identification of shared structural features and nationally specific logics within what appears, at the surface level, to be a shared global phenomenon of AI-driven higher education reform.

### 3.2 Documentary Corpus

The primary data consists of a purposively constructed corpus of national-level policy documents. Corpus boundaries were established on the following principle: only documents that (a) explicitly address the role of higher education in national AI development, (b) were issued by a national government authority, and (c) were publicly accessible in full-text form in English or verified translation were included. The corpus comprises:

**Table 1.** Documentary Corpus Primary and Supplementary Sources by Case.

| Case | Primary Documents Analysed | Supplementary Academic Sources |
|---|---|---|
| China | New Generation AI Development Plan (State Council, 2017), full text, 35 pp.; AI+ Education national guidelines, Ministry of Education (2025), Sections 1–4 | Liu et al. (2025); Yang et al. (2026); Shan et al. (2024) |
| USA | CHIPS and Science Act (2022), Division B (CHIPS for America); Executive Order on AI Education (April 2025), full text; NSF Research Security Policy Update (2025) | Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025); NSF (2024) |
| UAE | UAE National Strategy for Higher Education 2030, full text; UAE National AI Strategy 2031, Sections 1–3 | Fadlelmula et al. (2024); Khan et al. (2025) |
| Saudi Arabia | Vision 2030, Chapter 3 (Thriving Economy); SDAIA National AI Strategy 2030, full text | Alotaibi et al. (2023); Fadlelmula et al. (2024) |
| Pakistan | National AI Policy 2025 (Government of Pakistan), full text, 42pp | Mujeeb et al. (2026); Government of Pakistan (2025) |

### 3.3 Analytical Procedure: Critical Discourse Analysis

The analytical approach is critical discourse analysis (CDA) as theorised by Fairclough (2003) and applied to education policy research by Taylor (2004) and Rogers et al. (2016). CDA is preferred to other qualitative approaches such as thematic content analysis or interpretive policy analysis because it pays attention not only to what policy documents say but also to how they say it: the specific linguistic, rhetorical and generic features through which ideology is naturalised, power legitimated and futures constructed as inevitable or desirable. This distinction is important for the present study because the core claim that AI education policy contains nationally specific future imaginaries is fundamentally a claim about discourse, not merely policy content.

The unit of analysis was the policy statement, defined as any clause or sentence within the corpus which made a normative, directive or aspirational statement about the relationship between AI and higher education. In each of the policy statements, analytical attention was paid to three levels of discourse, drawing on Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model: (a) the textual level, considering specific linguistic features such as lexical choices (the semantic fields in which AI is framed, sovereignty, rejuvenation, diversification, and development); transitivity patterns (who acts on whom and whose agency is foregrounded); and nominalisations that naturalise political

choices as technical necessities; (b) the three levels of CDA were operationalised in the following analytical procedure. First, the documents were read in their entirety to identify the major semantic fields within which AI was positioned – what Fairclough (2003) calls the 'representational' function of discourse. Second, recurring metaphors and narrative structures were thematically coded in an inductive manner, with a focus on the use of temporal language (mobilisation of past humiliations and future glories) and civilisational/developmental claims. Third, the coded discourse that emerged was structured around the three analytical dimensions that underpin the case study analysis: (i) the vision of the national future being projected; (ii) the role ascribed to universities in realising that future; and (iii) the type of citizen subject being produced. Two strategies were used to ensure analytical reliability: systematic triangulation with peer-reviewed secondary literature on each case (listed in Table 1), which allowed for discursive claims to be compared with independent empirical accounts; and inter-case comparison, which required that coding categories be applied consistently across all four national contexts.

### 3.4 Case Selection Rationale and the Gulf States Pairing

There is a need to explicitly justify the decision to treat the UAE and Saudi Arabia as a paired case on theoretical grounds rather than as two entirely separate cases. The pairing is based on three theoretical grounds, not merely geographic proximity. First, both states are paradigmatic rentier states as theorised by Beblawi and Luciani (1987): their political economies are organised around the distribution of hydrocarbon revenues rather than the extraction of taxes from a productive citizenry, which produces a distinctive relationship between the state, higher education and the aspirational citizen subject that does not exist in any other case in this study. This shared structural condition generates a shared structural anxiety, namely the fiscal and political unsustainability of oil dependence, which in turn feeds directly into the AI-education imaginaries present in both contexts. Secondly, both states have embraced vision-based national planning architectures (Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia; the UAE centenary plan and its derivatives), which position AI as a tool for economic diversification within a shared "post-rentier modernisation" logic. Third, and most crucial for the discourse analytic argument, both states construct the imagined AI citizen as a nationally loyal, globally competitive subject who can lead a knowledge-based economy. The making of such a subject requires simultaneously domesticating global knowledge capital and asserting cultural distinctiveness.

However, the pairing conceals important differences that must be recognised. So we need a more sustained analysis than this paper can accommodate of the historically stronger integration of religious authority in curriculum governance in Saudi Arabia; its more constrained international partnership model compared to the UAE's free zone university ecosystem (which hosts over 40 licensed international institutions); and the gendered dimensions of its AI citizen subject formation, particularly in the context of Vision 2030's dramatic expansion of female higher education participation. While the present study analytically addresses the paired case as suitable for its core argument on the shared post-rentier imaginary, it acknowledges that a dedicated comparative study of the UAE and Saudi AI education policy as separate cases would make a significant contribution to the literature in its own right. Section 4.3 reports subcase differences that directly relate to the analytical dimensions considered.

### 3.5 Positionality and Limitations

Policy documents represent official, top-down discourses; this paper does not claim to capture how universities, faculty, or students actually experience, enact, negotiate, or resist AI-nationalist imaginaries at the institutional level. The analysis is

also necessarily synchronic, drawing on documents from 2017–2025; longitudinal analysis of how these imaginaries shift over time remains beyond the scope of the present study. Finally, while every effort has been made to use peer-reviewed secondary literature to supplement and cross-check policy document claims, some factual data points about higher education system statistics are drawn from official government sources whose figures are not independently verified.

## 4. Case Studies

### 4.1 China: AI as Civilisational Rejuvenation

#### 4.1.1 Policy Context

From the outset, China's engagement with the global AI race was a matter of the state, not the market. The New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (State Council, 2017) set out a formal national trajectory for world-leading AI innovation by 2030, with interim milestones for 2020 and 2025. It explicitly framed AI as a matter of national sovereignty, economic security and civilisational standing, not simply a question of industrial productivity. Higher education was mobilised with extraordinary quickness. In a peer-reviewed analysis of responses to AI policy by Chinese universities, Liu et al. (2025) report the rapid institutionalisation of AI curricula and the emergence of AI-specific degree programs across hundreds of Chinese institutions between 2018 and 2024. Yang et al. (2026) situate this as part of a "centralised, state-led approach with high integration of institutional instruments", as opposed to the more liberal or market-orientated approaches of Japan and South Korea. In April 2025, the Ministry of Education's Smart Education of China 2.0 and the national AI+ Education guidelines (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2025) extended the scope of AI integration to all levels of education and positioned AI literacy as fundamental to "China's modernisation drive".

#### 4.1.2 The Vision: Civilisational Competitiveness

The dominant semantic field in China's AI-education policy discourse is that of rejuvenation or revival. The 2017 Plan opens with a direct invocation of the "Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," positioning AI not as a neutral technology but as a civilisational instrument through which China reclaims its rightful place among the world's leading civilisations after the "century of humiliation" that began with the Opium Wars. Lexically, the document constructs AI through a cluster of sovereignty-signalling terms guojia zhanlüe (national strategy), zizhu chuangxin (indigenous innovation), hexin jingzhengli (core competitiveness) that locate technological capability within a nationalist ontology of civilisational destiny. This is not, as Shan et al. (2024) have shown in their analysis of Chinese techno-cultural imaginaries in humanities education, merely rhetorical window-dressing: it structures curriculum design, research agenda-setting, and institutional evaluation in material ways.

#### 4.1.3 The Role of Universities and the Citizen-Subject

Universities are assigned a dual function within this imaginary. They must simultaneously produce AI-capable professionals who can compete in the global knowledge economy and ideologically aligned subjects whose technical expertise is embedded in loyalty to the party-state and its civilisational project. Tong's (2025) analysis of ideological-political education in Chinese universities documents how courses on "the Chinese Dream" and the "Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" are formally integrated with AI literacy curricula, making the fusion of technical competence and national identity an explicit rather than merely implicit institutional goal. The "Double First-Class" university initiative links research excellence directly to national

strategic goals, creating a hierarchy that binds institutional prestige to the service of national AI ambition. Yet, as Liu et al. (2025) note, this produces genuine tensions within Chinese HE: humanities scholars at institutions such as Renmin University have actively sought to reframe AI as an "unprecedented opportunity" for humanistic inquiry, partially redirecting the nationalist technology narrative into more academically autonomous spaces.

### 4.2 United States: AI as Democratic Technological Supremacy

#### 4.2.1 Policy Context

The institutional architecture of the United States' AI-education policy landscape is more complex than that of China, reflecting the decentralised structure of American higher education and the mixed public-private character of its innovation ecosystem. The CHIPS and Science Act (2022) allocated more than $100 billion for scientific research, workforce development, and semiconductor reshoring, framing these investments as a matter of national security and economic leadership (NSF, 2024). Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025) place the US in a typology of governance termed 'market-led' in which universities function as 'talent pipelines' within a largely decentralised system, a characterisation that addresses the institutional architecture but not the ideological content of the future national visions that are projected. The NSF AI Education Act (2024) and the Trump administration's Executive Order on AI Education (April 2025) further entrenched AI in the national higher education agenda with a notable rhetorical shift between administrations: Biden-era documents stress democratic values and equity; Trump-era language foregrounds technological supremacy and geopolitical competition with China.

#### 4.2.2 The Vision: Liberal-Technological Leadership

The dominant discursive formation in US AI education policy is one that productively, if unstably, merges two historically grounded national narratives. The first is American technological exceptionalism, the belief, deep in the national psyche since at least the Space Race and the Cold War, that the United States is the natural home of transformative innovation and that its technological leadership is both a market achievement and a democratic entitlement. The preamble to the CHIPS and Science Act explicitly constructs this narrative: dominance in semiconductors and AI are not policy choices but expressions of what America naturally is and must continue to be. The second narrative is a democratic legitimacy claim that has become more explicit in direct response to Chinese AI development: that American AI, produced in open, diverse, and academically free universities, is uniquely trustworthy and freedom-preserving in ways that authoritarian alternatives are not (NSF, 2025). This narrative is explicitly stated in NSF research security policy documents, which identify "open, collaborative science" as a distinctively American and distinctively democratic value that is threatened by foreign interference.

#### 4.2.3 The Role of Universities and the Citizen-Subject

US universities are in a conflicted position: they are expected to produce AI talent for national competitiveness but also to be centres of open, international collaborative research – a tension the CHIPS Act partially addresses by tying federal money to restrictions on collaboration with adversarial nations. This tension is institutionally explicit in the NSF's updated research security policies (2025), including prohibitions on Confucius Institutes and certification requirements regarding foreign talent programmes. Academic freedom and national security are put in a relationship of managed coexistence rather than complementarity. The AI citizen being built is the entrepreneurial innovator, technically skilled, nationally committed, globally competitive and in the framing of the Trump administration – security screened. Faculty

organisations have challenged the securitisation of research funding. They have articulated an alternative imaginary of the university as a globally open, academically free institution for the service of humanity rather than national security. This alternative imaginary is available within the liberal-technological frame, even as it is squeezed by its security-nationalist variant.

### 4.3 Gulf States: AI as Post-Oil Sovereignty

#### 4.3.1 Policy Context and the Paired Case Rationale

Here, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's higher education policies are analysed as a theoretically justified paired case (the full justification is in Section 3.4) with a common structural condition: the urgent need for the replacement of hydrocarbon revenues with knowledge-based economic activity before the political and fiscal viability of the rentier state is exhausted (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). As part of the Kingdom's Vision 2030, artificial intelligence (AI) is one of seven key pillars for the national economic transformation, and the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) has been established as the main coordinating body for the national AI strategy which includes reforming higher education. A systematic review of AI in Saudi Arabian higher education, published in Sustainability by Alotaibi et al. (2023), discusses the rapid institutionalisation of AI-based learning outcomes within Saudi universities and the opportunities and structural barriers this process generates. This pattern is also seen in the systematic review of AI research across the broader GCC by Fadlelmula et al. (2024): heavy investment in digital transformation, significant barriers in terms of faculty AI literacy and infrastructure, and a strong policy-level commitment to AI as an instrument of economic diversification.

#### 4.3.2 Sub-case Differences: UAE and Saudi Arabia

The two states express different institutional logics within the shared post-rentier imaginary. The UAE's internationalisation strategy is even more aggressive: the UAE's National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 explicitly positions the UAE as a global knowledge hub, and its free-zone university model – home to more than 40 licensed international institutions, including NYU Abu Dhabi and Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI), the world's first graduate-level AI university embodies an imaginary where national prestige is constructed through domesticating globally validated excellence. Saudi Arabia's model is relatively more centralised, with SDAIA coordinating national AI targets (placement among the global top ten countries in AI; training over 20,000 local data and AI specialists) through a state-directed framework. One important sub-case distinction concerns the gendered construction of the AI citizen-subject: Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has greatly expanded female higher education participation as an explicit policy goal, and the AI citizen being constructed in Saudi policy discourse is considerably more gender-inclusive than one might have expected given historical institutional structures, a distinction that this analysis notes but cannot fully develop within its scope.

#### 4.3.3 The Shared Vision: Post-Rentier Modernisation

Across both sub-cases, the dominant discursive construction is one of sovereign reinvention. Oil provided the material conditions of Gulf state formation; AI is being positioned as the basis of a second, more durable form of sovereignty, one grounded in knowledge, human capital, and technological capability rather than the accident of geological endowment. Policy documents in both cases construct AI through a dual semantic field that places global competitiveness and cultural rootedness in productive tension: graduates are simultaneously to compete globally and to remain distinctively Emirati or Saudi in their identity and civic commitments. A key structural tension across both sub-cases concerns the gap between the envisioned AI citizen and demographic

reality: AI-related academic talent in Gulf universities remains predominantly expatriate (Fadlelmula et al., 2024), and this gap between imagination and reality is itself analytically significant; it reveals the promissory character of Gulf AI education policy (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024), which is partially self-aware.

### 4.4 Pakistan: AI as Developmental Nationalism

#### 4.4.1 Policy Context

The National AI Policy 2025, approved by the federal cabinet on 30 July 2025, is the latest and most analytically instructive entry in the global landscape of national AI strategies. It intends to train one million AI professionals by 2030 and to make Pakistan a leading AI hub in South Asia (Government of Pakistan, 2025). Its flagship higher education instruments include 3,000 AI scholarships a year until 2028 and a network of AI Centres of Excellence in Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore. An important independent contextualisation is provided by the comparative analysis of AI governance in Australian and Pakistani higher education by Mujeeb et al. (2026). They identify a “technical paradox” in resource-constrained Pakistani institutions, whereby specialised AI training is concentrated in technology hubs, but there is a severe pedagogical policy vacuum across the broader university system. This produces “siloed human capital” and high academic friction for non-technical students. This finding directly validates the analysis of the present paper concerning the mismatch between the ambitious AI imaginary presented in Pakistan's policy documents and the institutional realities of implementation.

#### 4.4.2 The Vision: South Asian AI Leadership and Developmental Sovereignty

The difference between the Pakistani AI education imaginary and the other cases is that the former is developmental and not geopolitical. In Pakistan, AI is not primarily framed as a formidable power competition tool, but rather as a domestic development issue: poverty, unemployment, agricultural inefficiency, governance deficits, and the need to retain, rather than export, the country’s large young engineering talent. The imaginary here is thus of developmental sovereignty: the ability to solve national problems on the basis of nationally developed technological capability rather than through continued dependence on foreign expertise, aid or investment.

At the same time, the imaginary has a regional geopolitical dimension which cannot be divorced from the domestic developmental logic. Pakistan’s ambition to lead South Asia in AI development situates it in implicit competition with India, and the Government of Pakistan's (2025) policy document explicitly mentions India. AI Mission as a regional benchmark, a discursive move that is not technical but politically meaningful given the deep adversarial relationship between the two countries. The policy ambition–institutional capacity gap in Pakistan is wider than in any of the comparator contexts they examine, Mujeeb et al. (2026) note, cautioning that "aspirational mandates” without “prescriptive frameworks” risk regulatory convergence at the elite institutional level while increasing inequalities across the wider system. The AI citizen in the making is the young, AI-literate Pakistani professional who can participate in the global digital economy while contributing to national development goals, an imagined figure whose competence is, at this discursive moment, more aspirational than accomplished.

#### 4.4.3 The Role of Universities and Negotiation

Pakistani universities occupy a structurally unusual position in this imaginary landscape. Unlike in China, where the state can direct institutional behaviour through hierarchical planning instruments, or in the Gulf, where sovereign wealth funds provide both leverage and resources, the Pakistani state's relationship with its university sector is characterised by significant institutional diversity and limited centrally available

resources. Leading institutions such as NUST and LUMS pursue AI research agendas that partially exceed or redirect state policy priorities, a form of institutional negotiation that, as Mujeeb et al. (2026) document, has produced convergence with international AI governance standards at elite institutions even while public university policy lags. Faculty AI literacy challenges and uneven digital infrastructure remain significant structural barriers (Mujeeb et al., 2026), and the gap between the policy imaginary and institutional reality is, by the government's own acknowledgement, the defining challenge of implementation.

## 5. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

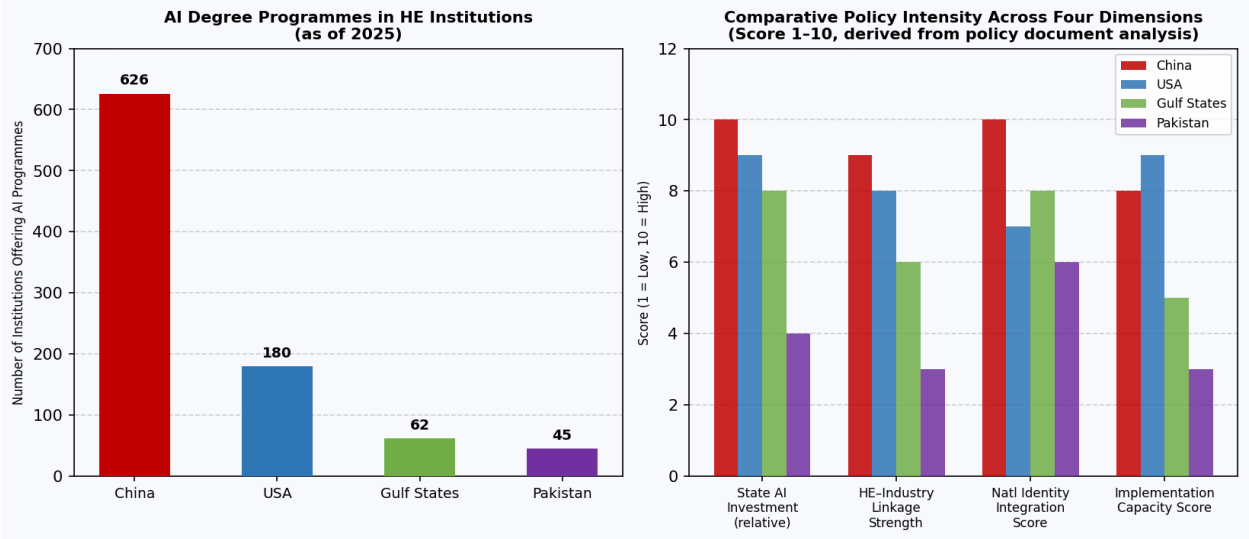
### 5.1 Four Imaginaries, One Technology

**Table 2.** Comparative Typology of Techno-Nationalist Future Imaginaries (revised to separate UAE and Saudi Arabia sub-cases).

| Country/Region | Core Imaginary | Primary Legitimating Narrative | Citizen-Subject | HE Role |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| China | Civilisational Rejuvenation | Historical destiny & CCP legitimacy | Technical expert & nationally loyal subject | State-directed national mission hub |
| USA | Democratic Technological Supremacy | Exceptionalism & national security | Entrepreneurial innovator | Market-competitive talent pipeline |
| UAE | Post-Rentier Modernisation (global hub) | Prestige through domesticated global excellence | AI-native, globally mobile national | International knowledge hub |
| Saudi Arabia | Post-Rentier Modernisation (state-directed) | Economic diversification & civilisational confidence | AI-capable, culturally rooted national | Centralised SDAIA-coordinated system |
| Pakistan | Developmental Nationalism | Poverty reduction & South Asian regional leadership | AI-literate development professional | Capacity-building site under resource constraint |

Despite sharing the same technological object, the five national/sub-national cases generate fundamentally different future imaginaries. China's imaginary is civilisational and historically saturated, drawing its legitimating force from a narrative of national destiny interrupted and now resumed. America's is exceptionalist and security-inflected, positioning democratic values and technological leadership as mutually reinforcing but increasingly in tension under competitive pressure. The Gulf sub-cases share a post-rentier logic but diverge in implementation: the UAE constructs AI-led sovereignty through the domestication of globally validated excellence, while Saudi Arabia pursues a more centralised state-directed model that pairs global ambition with assertions of civilisational confidence. Pakistan's imaginary is developmental and regionally oriented, framing AI education primarily as a tool of internal transformation with an implicit competitive relationship with India. These are not surface-level differences in rhetorical style; they reflect deep structural variations in national historical experiences, geopolitical positions, and political cultures.

**Figure 2.** Comparative AI Policy Intensity Across Five National Cases (2025). Note. Policy intensity scores (right panel) are author-derived qualitative assessments based on CDA of primary policy documents; they are not independently validated metrics. Left panel data drawn from peer-reviewed secondary literature (Liu et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026; Fadlelmula et al., 2024).




## 5.2 Against Isomorphism: Engaging the Glonacal Framework

No discursive support for the globalisation thesis in higher education research that universities are converging to a common global model through standardisation, international ranking, student mobility and shared knowledge economy discourse (Zapp et al., 2021) can be found in the comparative analysis presented here. This finding, however, needs to be carefully positioned in relation to Marginson's (2022b) glonacal heuristic. Marginson already hints at the coexistence of national and global scales in higher education rather than the former being obliterated by the latter. The glonacal framework is not an isomorphism thesis but a multi-scalar account of persistent national difference within globalising systems. Thus, the contribution of the present paper is not to show that national difference persists; this is already shown by Marginson (2022b) and Shahjahan et al. (2022) from spatial and affect-theoretic perspectives but to clarify how national difference is actively reproduced and intensified in the specific context of AI-driven higher education reform. That mechanism is the techno-nationalist future imaginary: the discursive construction of a nationally specific technological future that mobilises historical narratives of destiny, civilisational standing, developmental aspiration or democratic exceptionalism to naturalise particular configurations of AI education policy as expressions of national identity rather than mere technical choices.

What the comparative analysis then adds to the global framework is precisely what Shahjahan et al. (2022) call for in their critique of methodological nationalism: a denaturalisation of the nation-state as the presumed container of higher education and an exploration of how it is discursively constructed and rendered 'sticky' through particular policy imaginaries. The irony identified in the present analysis – that the technology most often cited as the agent of global convergence is itself being nationally appropriated in ways that amplify rather than diminish national divergence extends and complicates the glonacal account. In this reading AI is not simply another technology mediated within the existing scalar architecture of higher education but a politically charged object whose mobilisation is actively rescaling the national scale by offering new discursive resources for nationalist legitimation.

Another difficulty must be acknowledged. The comparative analysis finds nationally divergent policy imaginaries, but the AI systems being deployed across all four contexts – large language models trained on mainly English language corpora, based on architectures developed mainly in US and Chinese research ecosystems may themselves generate a form of epistemic homogenisation that conflicts with the nationally divergent imaginaries observed at the policy level. The irony here runs deep: governments use AI to think about the futures that are particular to their countries, but the AI systems that facilitate this thinking are themselves the products of a globally concentrated, linguistically asymmetrical knowledge infrastructure. This tension between nationally divergent policy imaginaries and technologically convergent AI systems is a productive site for future research that the current analysis can identify but not resolve.

### 5.3 Universities as Active Negotiators

The discursive evidence across all four cases indicates that universities are not simply passive instruments of state AI imaginaries, a point which directly builds on the argument of Schildermans and Tröhler (2025), who show that universities are translating, extending, and sometimes subverting national imaginaries, rather than simply executing them. Liu et al. (2025) illustrate how humanities scholars in China, such as those at Renmin University, have taken the initiative to position AI as an opportunity for humanistic exploration, leveraging the language of “national rejuvenation” to advocate for the significance of critical thinking and ethical reasoning in AI creation, a counter-narrative that utilises the state’s own legitimising discourse to expand the room for academic freedom. The tensions between “efficiency and depth, unified planning and diverse innovation, and technological empowerment and humanistic foundation” identified by Liu et al. (2025) are not simply implementation challenges but sites of active institutional negotiation.

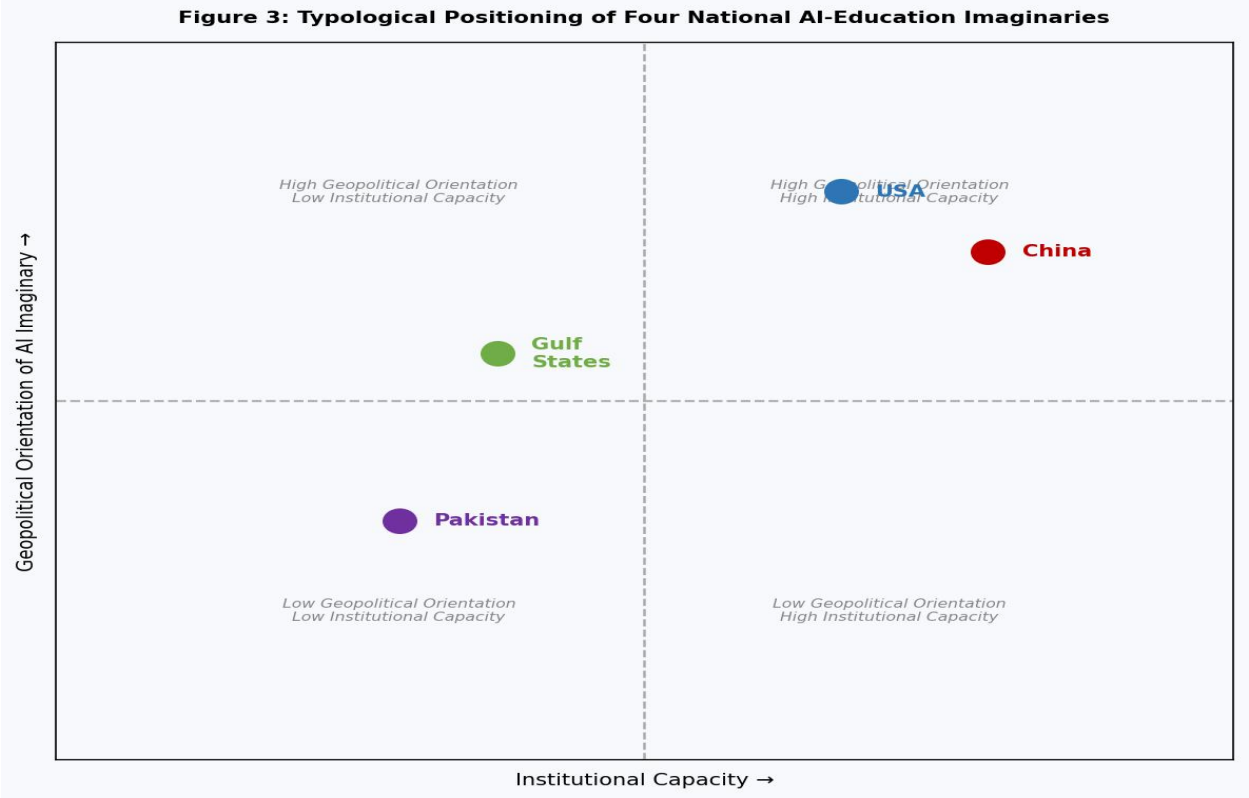
In the United States, faculty organisations have explicitly challenged the securitisation of research funding, offering an alternative imaginary of the university as a globally open institution that serves humanity, not national security, a counter-imaginary structurally available within the liberal-technological frame even as it is constrained by its security-nationalist variant. This resistance has material consequences: several major research universities have publicly rejected aspects of CHIPS Act funding conditionality that they view as incompatible with academic freedom norms (NSF, 2025). Fadlelmula et al. (2024) identify what could be conceived as institutional resistance by capacity constraint in the Gulf: universities that lack the faculty AI literacy and infrastructure to implement state AI mandates are, in effect, negotiating the pace and shape of the transformation from below, even without explicitly contesting the imaginary. In Pakistan, Mujeeb et al. (2026) show that elite institutions like NUST and LUMS are, independently of national policy, converging with international AI governance standards, pursuing their own research agendas that exceed or redirect state priorities, which is a form of institutional entrepreneurialism that is de facto negotiation with the national imaginary. Across all four cases, the pattern confirms that techno-nationalist future imaginaries are not imposed on universities but are actively contested, selectively appropriated and partially redirected by institutional actors pursuing their own interpretations of academic mission.

### 5.4 The Promissory Gap

Following Elfert and Ydesen (2024), this gap can be characterised as a structural feature rather than an incidental failure of promissory policy discourse: the political function of ambitious AI-nationalist imaginaries is partly to be believed and to motivate institutional transformation, rather than to be literally achieved within the stated

timeframes. The promises embedded in national AI strategies are productive precisely because they are future-orientated; they create the political will and institutional momentum that move universities in the direction the imagination points, even when the destination remains perpetually over the horizon. As Loudoun and Van Ruyskensvelde (2025) observe, this is a constitutive feature of how futures are mobilised to govern educational presents.

**Figure 3.** Typological Positioning of National AI-Education Imaginaries by Geopolitical Orientation and Institutional Capacity. Note. Positions are derived from qualitative assessment of primary policy documents and supplementary peer-reviewed literature; they are indicative rather than precisely scaled.




## 6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the ways in which governments are utilising stories of AI development to construct new national imaginaries in higher education and whether the discursive analysis of AI education policy would reveal convergence to a shared global model or continuing national divergence. Our discursive analysis across four national contexts and five subcases suggests that AI has become a key medium through which states mobilise higher education to project nationally specific visions of the future. Although these visions share a surface-level technological vocabulary, they are grounded in historically specific nationalist logics that differ in systematic and analytically recoverable ways. In policy discourse, China's AI University is portrayed as a tool of civilisational rejuvenation. America is designed as a laboratory of democratic technological supremacy. The Gulf states project symbols and engines of post-oil sovereignty, with the UAE emphasising global knowledge domestication and Saudi Arabia emphasising state-directed civilisational confidence. The imaginary of AI education in Pakistan is one of developmental nationalism within South Asian regional leadership. The technology is identical, but the national futures it is mobilised to serve are substantively different.

The paper's theoretical contribution is the concept of techno-nationalist future imaginaries: ideologically constructed, nationally specific visions of the future embedded in AI education policy that operate to mobilise universities as instruments of nation-building in the twenty-first century. This concept extends Schildermans and Tröhler's (2025) future imaginaries framework to new empirical terrain, provides a theoretically specified account of the mechanism by which the active reproduction of national difference occurs in Marginson's (2022b) glonacal architecture, and responds to the call by Shahjahan et al. (2022) for analyses that denaturalise the nation-state in higher education research by demonstrating how it is discursively constructed through specific AI-nationalist policy imaginaries. It also provides a theoretically richer account of the ideological and temporal dimensions of AI education policy that governance frameworks alone cannot reveal, extending and complementing the governance typology of Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2025).

The implications for higher education policy are profound. Policymakers designing AI education reforms on mainly technical or economic grounds risk overlooking the ideological work these reforms accomplish and the political contestation they inevitably generate. The securitisation of research in the United States, the ideological embedding of AI curricula in China, and the gap between policy ambition and institutional capacity in Pakistan are not incidental features of AI policy they are structural expressions of the nationalist imaginaries that sustain it.

Several limitations of this analysis should be mentioned. This paper focuses only on a critical discourse analysis of policy documents as official, top-down constructions of reality and does not capture how faculty, students, or university administrators actually experience, enact, negotiate, or resist AI nationalist imaginaries at the institutional level. There is a need for future research to address this gap through ethnographic and interview-based methodologies. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are treated in pairs, which in itself is theoretically justified in terms of their common rentier-state structural condition and vision-based policy architecture but inevitably underplays their institutional and curriculum-governance differences. A dedicated comparative study of these two cases as separate units would be a major contribution. Third, this study does not fully resolve the tension identified in Section 5.2 between nationally divergent AI education imaginaries and the technologically convergent AI systems through which they are mediated; longitudinal and technical analysis of how LLM-driven tools are actually reshaping what counts as "national knowledge" in university contexts represents an important direction for future inquiry. Fourth, the gender dimensions of AI-nationalist imaginaries, i.e., who the imagined AI citizen is in gendered terms and what the implications of AI-education reform are for gender equity, remain underexplored across all four cases and constitute a major gap.

Going forward, the overlap between AI and nationalist higher education policy will only increase as AI capabilities improve and geopolitical competition intensifies. One of the most important tasks for comparative higher education researchers in the next decade is to understand how universities respond to the pressures that result of global openness versus national loyalty, of technical competence versus ideological formation, of ambitious imaginaries versus constrained realities. This paper has tried to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for that continuing inquiry.

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* He opted for open review and authorized the disclosure of his identity as a reviewer only in the published paper.