

Change Management in Higher Education Administration: Perceptions of an AI Chatbot for Student Affairs Office

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Abstract: Digital transformation is increasingly influencing the way universities deliver administrative and support services. AI-powered chatbots are emerging as promising tools to enhance communication, efficiency, and user experience in student–university interactions. However, their successful implementation requires not only technological preparedness but also thoughtful change management to align organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and service workflows. This paper presents a qualitative study exploring how university students perceive the planned introduction of an AI chatbot at a faculty’s student administration office. Using semi-structured interviews, the research examines expectations, perceived benefits, and concerns related to the chatbot’s integration into academic service processes. The analysis will be grounded in the theoretical framework of change management and institutional adaptability. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how students conceptualize AI-driven change in university administration, offering practical insights for managing digital transformation in higher education institutions.

Keywords: change management, AI, higher education, student’s affairs

JEL Classification: I23, M15, O33

1 Introduction

Digital transformation is reshaping how universities deliver both academic and administrative services. Among these changes, AI-powered chatbots have emerged as promising tools for improving communication, efficiency, and accessibility in student–university interactions (Alenezi & Akour, 2023; Antonopoulou, Begkos, & Zhu, 2023). By automating routine inquiries—such as deadlines, procedures, or form submissions—chatbots can reduce administrative workload and offer 24/7 support, aligning with growing expectations for immediacy and transparency in higher education. However, successful integration of AI systems extends beyond technology. It requires organizational change, adaptation of workflows, and cultural acceptance across institutional levels (Kotter, 1996; Scott, 2014; Schein, 2010). Without addressing these human and institutional dimensions, technological innovation may face resistance or underuse despite its technical potential (Labadze, Grigolia, & Machaidze, 2023). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that the lack of long-term sustainability strategies and clear ethical guidelines remains a significant barrier to adoption (Prokhorova et al., 2024). Moreover, the integration of AI tools often outpaces the development of necessary regulatory frameworks, creating a gap between technological capability and institutional readiness (Chukwuere, 2024; El mourabit et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding how stakeholders—students and academics—perceive such innovations becomes essential for sustainable digital transformation.

This study examines perceptions surrounding the planned introduction of an AI chatbot at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové (FIM UHK). The chatbot, designed as a knowledge-base system trained on official faculty regulations and procedures, aims to assist the Student Affairs Office in responding to frequently asked questions. The investigation focuses on expectations, perceived benefits, and concerns related to its deployment. Although several studies have explored AI chatbots in educational contexts, most focus on learning outcomes or technological performance (Balderas, García-Mena, Huerta, Mora, & Dodero, 2023; Stöhr, Ou, & Malmström, 2024). Far fewer examine the organizational and cultural implications of implementing such systems in administrative environments. Addressing this gap contributes to understanding how universities can align AI innovation with institutional culture and user trust.

The research integrates theoretical perspectives from change management (Kotter, 1996; Hiatt, 2006; Hussain et al., 2018), institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), technology acceptance (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh,

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Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003; Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012), and service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Together, these frameworks provide a multi-level lens for analyzing both human and organizational readiness for AI adoption.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How do students and academic staff conceptualize the role of an AI chatbot in student administrative processes?

RQ2: What benefits, limitations, and concerns do they associate with its use?

RQ3: What organizational and cultural conditions are necessary for successful implementation and acceptance?

By exploring these questions, the paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how AI-driven change is perceived and negotiated in higher education administration, offering practical insights for managing digital transformation in similar institutional contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the implementation of AI chatbots in higher education administration requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines technological, organizational, and cultural perspectives.

Five theoretical areas inform this study: digital transformation, change management, institutional and cultural theory, technology acceptance, and service quality and governance.

In higher education, digital transformation extends beyond digitizing processes to a systemic reconfiguration of workflows, services, and institutional culture (Alenezi & Akour, 2023). Universities are increasingly adopting AI tools to enhance efficiency and responsiveness (Antonopoulou, Begkos, & Zhu, 2023). However, as Labadze, Grigolia, and Machaidze (2023) note, transformation initiatives often fail without adequate stakeholder communication and cultural alignment. Chatbots represent a socio-technical change: they automate knowledge access but also redefine human roles in service delivery.

Organizational change models explain how institutions adapt to innovation. Kotter's (1996) eight-step model emphasizes leadership, communication, and early wins to establish commitment, while the ADKAR framework (Hiatt, 2006) focuses on individual transitions—awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. Lewin's classical “unfreeze–change–refreeze” process remains a useful metaphor for shifting entrenched routines when paired with participatory leadership (Hussain et al., 2018). Together, these models stress that successful technological adoption depends on managing both structural and emotional aspects of change.

Universities are embedded in institutional environments governed by norms, traditions, and professional expectations (Scott, 2014). Institutional theory explains organizational behavior through mimetic (imitation), normative (professional standards), and coercive (policy pressures) mechanisms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Schein (2010) extends this view by showing how shared assumptions and values form an organization's culture, shaping openness to innovation. In the context of FIM UHK, institutional culture may both enable and constrain the adoption of an AI chatbot, depending on how it is communicated and framed.

User perceptions are central to implementation success. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) drive behavioral intention (Davis, 1989). The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) expands this with social influence and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003), while UTAUT2 adds hedonic motivation and habit (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012). These frameworks illuminate why students often welcome chatbots for convenience, whereas staff may hesitate if perceived benefits are unclear or workload increases.

Service quality in digital contexts depends on reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). These dimensions apply directly to chatbot evaluation—accuracy, tone, empathy, and escalation to human staff when necessary. Furthermore, compliance with privacy and data protection standards, particularly the GDPR, underpins user trust and institutional legitimacy (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020; Dushi, Lainati, & Hernandez, 2025). Trust in AI systems thus rests on both performance and transparent governance.

By integrating these frameworks, the study conceptualizes chatbot adoption across three interconnected levels: the micro level of individual acceptance (TAM/UTAUT, SERVQUAL), the meso level of organizational change and culture (Kotter,

Hiatt, Schein), and the macro level of institutional governance and legitimacy (Scott, DiMaggio & Powell, EPRS). This multi-level lens guides both data collection and analysis of stakeholder perceptions.

3. Methodology

This section describes the research design, participants, data collection, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations used in this study. The methodological approach was shaped by the study's aim—to explore perceptions of AI chatbot adoption within a real university environment—requiring qualitative depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

The research employed a qualitative, interpretivist design to investigate how students and academic staff perceive the planned introduction of an AI chatbot at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové (FIM UHK). A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables insight into individual experiences, beliefs, and expectations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semi-structured interviews provided a balance between guided discussion and open exploration. During the sessions, participants were shown a working prototype of a knowledge-based chatbot trained on faculty rules and regulations. This ensured their reflections were based on concrete interaction rather than abstract assumptions.

Ten individuals participated: five students and five academics. The sample was deliberately diverse in terms of study programs, teaching areas, and digital literacy. The sampling strategy followed a purposeful "maximum variation" approach to capture a dyadic perspective of the service encounter—analyzing views from both service receivers (students) and service providers (academics). This dual approach was critical for identifying the friction points between the demand for instant digital service and the institutional need for accuracy and protocol. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes, conducted in person or online. The small but information-rich sample aligns with both the Nielsen heuristic—five users uncover most usability issues (Nielsen, 2000)—and the information-power concept that values depth over breadth (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016).

Table 1 Composition of participants and key parameters of the conducted interviews at FIM UHK

Group	Number	Duration	Mode	Focus
Students	5	~30 min	In-person / Online	Expectations, benefits, and trust
Academics	5	~30 min	In-person / Online	Organizational readiness, risks, and governance

Source: Own processing

Interviews followed seven guiding themes derived from the theoretical framework: current communication challenges, expectations and benefits, concerns about reliability and empathy, privacy issues, and organizational readiness for change. Questions reflected constructs from TAM/UTAUT (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003), SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), and change-management models (Kotter, 1996; Hiatt, 2006). All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding combined deductive categories (usefulness, empathy, readiness, trust) with inductive themes that emerged from narratives such as “loss of human touch” or “AI as a neutral assistant.” Credibility was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive memoing documenting analytical choices.

The study adhered to institutional ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed. Because the chatbot prototype operated in a sandbox environment, no personal data were processed. Transcripts were stored securely and stripped of identifiers. Attention to GDPR compliance followed European Parliamentary Research Service (2020) guidance. Clear communication of privacy and data-handling practices—emphasized by Dushi, Lainati, and Hernandez (2025)—helped strengthen participant trust and institutional transparency.

In summary, the study's qualitative design, purposeful sampling, and thematic analysis provided a reliable foundation for exploring how members of an academic community perceive AI-assisted administration. The next section presents the thematic findings derived from these interviews.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of ten interviews revealed five interrelated themes reflecting both enthusiasm and skepticism toward the planned AI chatbot. Students emphasized convenience, fairness, and faster access to information, whereas academic staff expressed concerns regarding reliability, empathy, and institutional accountability. Together, the themes illustrate how technological acceptance interacts with organizational culture and trust.

Efficiency and Accessibility. Participants frequently highlighted the chatbot's potential to make administrative communication faster, clearer, and available 24/7. Students viewed it to reduce dependence on email delays and improve equity of access to information. This expectation aligns with the Perceived Usefulness and Effort Expectancy constructs of the TAM/UTAUT frameworks (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003) and the Responsiveness dimension of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Students thus perceive the chatbot as an efficiency-enhancing companion rather than a novelty.

"It would save me a lot of time—I wouldn't have to wait for an email just to ask when to submit something." (Student)

Reliability and Trust. While efficiency was welcomed, both groups expressed reservations about accuracy and accountability. Academics stressed that an incorrect response could undermine institutional credibility. Participants valued transparency—knowing when the chatbot was unsure and being redirected to a human officer. Trust therefore emerged as a mediating factor between usefulness and sustained use, supporting findings by Dushi, Lainati, and Hernandez (2025) that data governance and reliability are inseparable. This theme corresponds with Reliability and Assurance in SERVQUAL and the Reinforcement stage of ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006).

"If the chatbot gives wrong advice about an exam or scholarship, who takes responsibility?" (Academic)

Loss of Human Touch. Despite positive views on accessibility, several students and staff noted concerns about the impersonal nature of automated interaction. Administrative communication often serves emotional as well as informational purposes. This reflects the Empathy dimension of SERVQUAL and Schein's (2010) perspective on organizational culture as a social system. Participants agreed that the chatbot should complement, not replace personal contact, particularly for sensitive or complex issues. Hybrid models—AI for routine tasks, humans for nuanced cases—were widely supported.

"Sometimes you just need someone to listen, not a robot." (Student)

Change Readiness and Institutional Fit. Perceptions of change varied sharply between students and academics.

Students saw the chatbot as a natural step toward modernization, while some academics perceived potential disruption to established routines and workload. This divergence illustrates different stages of organizational readiness (Kotter, 1996; Hiatt, 2006). Students display high desire and knowledge to adopt change, whereas academics emphasize ability and reinforcement. Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) explains this tension as the coexistence of mimetic innovation pressure and normative conservatism typical in higher education. Addressing such asymmetry requires open dialogue, training, and visible leadership support.

"The younger generation expects this, but some colleagues are afraid it will complicate their work." (Academic)

Data Protection and Ethical Concerns. Both students and staff raised issues regarding privacy, transparency, and the handling of user data. Although participants generally trusted the university, they wanted clear communication about storage and processing. Data protection thus directly influenced trust and intention to use the chatbot. This theme resonates with GDPR principles and emphasizes that ethical transparency is integral to perceived service quality (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020; Dushi et al., 2025). Participants suggested adding a visible privacy disclaimer or data summary to the chatbot interface.

"Before I ask personal questions, I want to know what happens with my data." (Student)

The five themes collectively depict a balanced narrative of optimism and caution. Students associate the chatbot with modernization and accessibility, while academics stress governance, reliability, and human presence. Together, these findings highlight that technological innovation in higher education is fundamentally a cultural and organizational transition, requiring both empathy and accountability. The next section interprets these findings through the theoretical frameworks introduced earlier.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the introduction of an AI chatbot in higher education administration is not perceived solely as a technological upgrade but as a transformative cultural process. Students viewed the chatbot primarily to simplify administrative interactions, increase transparency, and save time, while academic staff were more cautious, highlighting

the need for accuracy, accountability, and empathy. This contrast captures a fundamental duality in digital transformation—its ability to enhance efficiency while simultaneously challenging long-standing norms of human-centered service delivery. Such divergence underscores that technological success depends not only on system design but also on the extent to which institutions manage the accompanying organizational and emotional change (Alenezi & Akour, 2023; Antonopoulou, Begkos, & Zhu, 2023).

At the individual level, participants' responses correspond closely with constructs from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Students' willingness to use the chatbot was largely determined by perceived usefulness, ease of use, and perceived reliability (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Yet, unlike traditional technology adoption studies, this research highlights trust as a mediating factor between perceived usefulness and actual acceptance. Users are more likely to adopt an AI-driven service when they understand its data logic, boundaries, and escalation mechanisms. In this sense, trust functions as both a psychological and institutional currency, shaped by perceptions of fairness, competence, and transparency (Dushi, Lainati, & Hernandez, 2025; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020). It links user-level adoption to institutional legitimacy, extending the TAM framework beyond functionality into the domain of ethics and governance.

From an organizational perspective, the findings reveal that adoption readiness depends on leadership communication, collective involvement, and cultural alignment. The contrast between student optimism and staff hesitation reflects different stages of change maturity, as conceptualized in ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006) and Kotter's eight-step model (1996). While students exhibit awareness and desire, some academics remain in the early phases of understanding and ability, wary of workflow disruption. This asymmetry confirms Hussain et al.'s (2018) view that leadership must create a shared vision and visible short-term wins to maintain momentum. Moreover, Schein's (2010) perspective on organizational culture helps explain why emotional safety—feeling heard and supported—is essential for effective digital transformation. Chatbots cannot simply be imposed as tools; they must be integrated into workflows that respect human expertise and institutional traditions.

The themes of empathy and service quality further align with the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Students valued responsiveness and convenience, whereas staff emphasized reliability and assurance. These differences suggest that a hybrid service model—where chatbots handle routine queries and human staff address complex or sensitive issues—offers the most balanced approach. To navigate these complexities, universities should adopt "participatory change strategies" rather than top-down mandates. Research by Prokhorova et al. (2024) indicates that involving stakeholders in the co-design phase of AI tools significantly reduces resistance by fostering a sense of psychological ownership. Furthermore, a "bimodal" implementation strategy—where AI handles high-volume routine queries while specialized staff focus exclusively on complex cases—can help bridge the gap between efficiency and empathy (Chukwuere, 2024). This aligns with the necessity of establishing a "digital culture" that prioritizes transparency over blind automation, ensuring that the technology serves as an enabler of human connection rather than a barrier (El mourabit et al., 2025). Such a model respects the university's service ethos while achieving operational efficiency. It also reflects an evolution from pure automation to augmented service delivery, in which AI enhances human capacity rather than replaces it. Within this hybrid framework, empathy remains a critical quality indicator, reinforcing that successful digital transformation requires not just intelligent systems but emotionally intelligent design.

At the institutional level, the study reflects broader forces of isomorphism and legitimacy described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2014). Universities are under normative and mimetic pressures to modernize through AI, yet innovation must align with ethical and regulatory boundaries to gain legitimacy. The strong emphasis on data protection and transparency indicates that GDPR compliance serves not only as a legal safeguard but also as a trust-building mechanism. Participants associated data governance with professional credibility, suggesting that effective communication of privacy policies, audit trails, and accountability structures is vital for sustained adoption (EPRS, 2020; Dushi et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings position trust as the central integrating construct—bridging individual perception, organizational culture, and institutional governance. Successful AI adoption in higher education thus depends on achieving harmony between efficiency and empathy, innovation and accountability, automation and human connection.

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the sample size (N=10), while sufficient for qualitative saturation within a specific faculty context, limits the transferability of findings to universities with different organizational cultures or lower baseline digital literacy. Second, the study utilized a prototype in a sandbox environment; user perceptions might differ in a live deployment scenario where real-world consequences (e.g., incorrect visa advice) are at stake. Finally, the participants were drawn from a Faculty of Informatics, potentially skewing the results toward a more techno-optimistic viewpoint compared to humanities or social science departments.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The study explored perceptions of students and academic staff regarding the planned introduction of an AI chatbot at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové. By combining insights from ten semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed that AI-assisted communication in academic administration is viewed simultaneously as a source of efficiency and a challenge to established practices. Students generally welcomed the chatbot as a convenient, modern, and fair tool that improves access to information, while academics emphasized potential risks associated with accuracy, accountability, and loss of personal interaction. These dual perspectives illustrate that the adoption of AI in higher education is not merely a technological process but a cultural negotiation requiring transparency, dialogue, and institutional leadership.

The research contributes to a nuanced understanding of AI-driven change management in university settings. The results support a multi-level interpretation of adoption: at the micro level, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and trust determine user acceptance (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003); at the meso level, organizational readiness, communication, and culture define the pace of change (Kotter, 1996; Hiatt, 2006; Schein, 2010); and at the macro level, governance and legitimacy influence whether innovation becomes institutionally sustainable (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In this framework, trust functions as a connecting element—linking technological reliability, ethical transparency, and organizational reputation. When users believe the system is accurate, fair, and compliant with data protection standards (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020; Dushi, Lainati, & Hernandez, 2025), their confidence extends from individual use to collective endorsement.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest several strategies for managing similar digital transformations. Universities should approach chatbot implementation as a strategic change project, not a software deployment. Clear leadership vision and participative communication help align expectations across stakeholder groups. Piloting the chatbot in limited administrative contexts, celebrating early successes, and establishing a transparent feedback loop can strengthen institutional readiness and reduce resistance (Kotter, 1996; Hiatt, 2006). Service design should follow a hybrid model, where the chatbot handles routine queries while human staff manage complex or emotionally sensitive cases. This balance between automation and empathy resonates with the principles of SERVQUAL—reliability, assurance, and empathy—as key determinants of perceived service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

Finally, the study underscores the ethical and governance dimensions of AI in education. GDPR compliance and transparent data communication are not only legal requirements but crucial enablers of trust and legitimacy. Institutions should proactively inform users about how data are stored, used, and anonymized, embedding accountability mechanisms such as audit trails or data protection impact assessments (EPRS, 2020). Looking forward, sustainable integration of AI into higher education will depend on universities' ability to maintain a human-centered digital culture—one that values both innovation and care. By treating AI systems as collaborative partners rather than replacements for human expertise, universities can enhance accessibility, efficiency, and fairness while preserving the empathy and professionalism that define academic service.

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