

Digitalization of Learning at Mahkota Tricom University: Inevitability or Mere Illusion (Critical Perspective)

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Abstract

This study critically examines the digitalization of learning at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU), Medan, Indonesia, focusing on whether it represents an inevitable transformation or merely an administrative illusion. Using a qualitative-critical approach, data were collected through interviews and observations involving 5 lecturers, 15 students, and 3 administrative staff members. The research aimed to analyze the extent to which digital learning has been systematically integrated into academic activities, identify the driving and inhibiting factors, evaluate the gap between institutional vision and practical implementation, and explore participants' perceptions of the reality of digital learning. The findings reveal that despite the visible presence of technology, digitalization at MTU remains fragmented and superficial. Lecturers and students face persistent issues, including unstable Wi-Fi, unreliable Zoom sessions, the absence of digital attendance systems, and limited e-learning storage (only 2 MB). These infrastructural weaknesses, combined with insufficient training and unclear institutional direction, have reduced digital learning to a symbolic performance rather than a pedagogical transformation. Participants expressed disappointment, describing digital learning as an additional workload without meaningful engagement. The study concludes that MTU's digitalization stands between aspiration and authenticity. The university has entered the digital vocabulary but not yet the digital culture. True transformation requires alignment between the Foundation, rectorate, lecturers, and students—ensuring that technology catalyzes academic creativity, not a cosmetic symbol of progress.

Keywords: digital learning, higher education, critical perspective, institutional alignment, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU) is one of the rapidly growing private universities located in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The university operates under the auspices of the Mahkota Tricom Unggul Foundation, which demonstrates a strong commitment to developing higher education that aligns with contemporary needs [1], [2]. The Foundation provides not only financial support but also strategic contributions through the development of digital infrastructure, the establishment of modern computer laboratories, and scholarship programs for outstanding students. This support represents the Foundation's tangible commitment to making MTU an innovative, adaptive, and technology-oriented university that responds to the evolving demands of modern industry and society.

The transformation of MTU from a College of Economics into a full-fledged university in 2021 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of higher education institutions in North Sumatra. This change carries substantial implications: the university must expand its academic orientation beyond theory-based teaching to embrace digital, research-based, and practice-oriented learning. Within this framework, the digitalization of learning has become one of MTU's strategic priorities. Through various initiatives, including hybrid learning, English-based international classes, and the integration of modern academic information systems, MTU aims to establish itself as a forward-thinking university aligned with the spirit of Education 4.0.

Nevertheless, the digital transformation of learning does not always unfold smoothly across all higher education contexts—particularly in relatively young private universities. Many institutions in Indonesia, especially those outside Java, face fundamental challenges, including limited technological infrastructure, uneven human resource readiness, and disparities in digital competence among lecturers, students, and administrators [3], [4], [5]. MTU is not entirely exempt from these challenges. Although the institution demonstrates a strong commitment to digital transformation, questions remain as to whether the digitalization of learning is genuinely and effectively implemented, or merely serves as an institutional gimmick designed to enhance visibility and attract new students.

The research gap emerges from the incongruity between institutional narratives of digital transformation and the realities of implementation on the ground. Previous studies on educational digitalization in Indonesia have focused mainly on major universities with robust technological ecosystems or public universities with well-established digital policies [6], [7], [8], [9]. In contrast, the experiences of regional private universities such as MTU have received little scholarly attention. However, understanding this context is essential to evaluate whether digital transformation in higher education is genuinely inclusive and substantive—or merely ceremonial and cosmetic.

- 1 This study aims to critically examine the phenomenon of learning digitalization at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University through a critical analytical perspective. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to:
- 2 Analyze the extent to which digital learning at MTU has been systemically integrated into academic activities.
- 3 Identify the driving and inhibiting factors affecting the implementation of digital learning within the university environment.
- 4 Evaluate the gap between institutional vision and the actual practices of digital learning implementation.
- 5 Explore lecturers' and students' perceptions regarding the digitalization process—whether it represents an inevitability of modern education or merely an illusion of progress.

Through a critical lens, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital transformation unfolds within a localized institutional context and to what extent digital policies in higher education truly foster pedagogical transformation and enhance learning quality in the post-pandemic era.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a critical perspective. The purpose of this research design was to explore and critically analyze the implementation of digital learning at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU), not only from the surface of institutional narratives but also from the real experiences of lecturers and students [10], [11], [12]. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, and social realities that cannot be captured through quantitative data alone.

2.2 Research Site and Participants

The research employed purposive sampling consisting of 5 lecturers, 15 students, and 3 administrative staff members at Universitas Mahkota Tricom Unggul (MTU). These participants were selected to represent the core human capital directly involved in the university's digital learning ecosystem. By including these three groups, the study sought to obtain comprehensive insights into how digitalization is perceived, practiced, and problematized within the institution [13], [14]. This approach enabled the research to critically explore not only the implementation of digital learning but also the underlying frustrations, limitations, and structural challenges that hinder its effectiveness.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

The data were obtained from three primary sources:

- 1 Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect detailed information on participants' experiences and perceptions of digital learning. Questions focused on teaching

practices, the effectiveness of online platforms, digital readiness, and obstacles encountered during implementation.

- 2 Observation – The researcher observed several online and hybrid classes to understand how digital learning was actually conducted, including the interactions between lecturers and students in digital environments.
- 3 Documentation – Institutional documents such as academic regulations, digital learning guidelines, and promotional materials were reviewed to understand the official discourse surrounding digitalization.

All data were recorded and transcribed immediately after collection to ensure accuracy and reliability.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted manually following several stages adapted from Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

- 1 Data Reduction – The researcher identified and selected the most relevant information related to digital learning implementation, institutional policies, and participant experiences.
- 2 Data Display – The reduced data were organized into thematic categories, including "institutional support," "digital readiness," "pedagogical transformation," and "implementation challenges."
- 3 Conclusion Drawing and Verification – Patterns and relationships among the themes were interpreted critically to understand whether digital learning at MTU represents a genuine transformation or merely a symbolic effort.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Human Resources

Table 1. Human Resources Involved in the Study

Category	Number	Main Responsibilities
Lecturers	5	Teaching, research, and mentoring; integrating technology in classrooms
Students	15	Active participants in hybrid courses and digital platforms
Administrative Staff	3	Support academic operations and manage IT systems
Total	23	—

This study employed purposive sampling consisting of 5 lecturers, 15 students, and 3 administrative staff members at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU). Data were collected through interviews and field observations to capture their lived experiences and critical perceptions of digital learning implementation within the institution.

3.2 Institutional Readiness: A Vision Without Rhythm

The university's official documents and promotional narratives declare digital transformation as a strategic priority. Supported by the Yayasan Mahkota Tricom Unggul, MTU has introduced initiatives such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), hybrid learning programs, and digital administrative services. However, beneath these formal commitments lies a slow rhythm of execution. Interviews with lecturers and staff show that most digital policies remain policy on paper—grand in vision but hesitant in practice. Decision-making remains top-down, with minimal participatory dialogue from lecturers or students.

Table 2. Institutional Readiness and Actualization Gap

Institutional Aspect	Declared Readiness	Field Reality	Critical Interpretation
Strategic Plan (2023–2028)	Integration of digital learning goals	Faculty-level plans remain vague	Visionary but detached from operational mechanisms

Financial Support	Annual IT and LMS budget allocated	Funds are often absorbed by maintenance, not innovation	Spending sustains systems, not progress
Leadership Commitment	Officially emphasized	Uneven enforcement across faculties	Leadership discourse is not matched with ground action

MTU's institutional digitalization, therefore, reveals a contradiction: a forward-looking institution structurally constrained by traditional managerial culture. The rhetoric of transformation risks becoming ceremonial rather than revolutionary [15].

3.3 Technological Infrastructure: Digital Walls in a Connected Age

The university has established digital infrastructure—servers, Wi-Fi, and smart classrooms—but their reliability is fragile. Many students experience interrupted access, and lecturers often revert to manual methods when systems crash. The technology, while present, operates more as a symbol of modernity than an enabler of learning.

Table 3. Digital Infrastructure Condition

Component	Availability	Functionality	Identified Weakness
LMS Platform	Active since 2021	Unstable at high traffic	Frequent downtime, no off-campus access
Internet Connectivity	200 Mbps shared	Uneven across buildings	Bottlenecks during class hours
Smart Classrooms	5 units	Functional	Poor maintenance and inconsistent scheduling
Digital Library	Online access provided	Underused	Lack of content integration and user guidance

Despite the visible presence of technology, there is a notable lack of systemic coherence. Infrastructure has become a silent witness to ambition, not a driver of pedagogical innovation. As one lecturer remarked during interviews:

"We have the platform, but not the culture. The system runs, but the people hesitate."

Another participant voiced a similar frustration regarding the technical realities of the so-called digital campus:

"The Wi-Fi is unreliable; sometimes Zoom suddenly disconnects during lectures. The e-learning platform itself is not feasible—it only provides 2 MB of storage. How can we talk about innovation when we cannot even upload proper materials?"

These testimonies reveal the fragile Foundation beneath MTU's digital aspirations. They highlight that digital transformation is not merely a matter of providing tools, but of ensuring those tools function effectively within a sustainable system [16], [17], [18]. The recurring infrastructural issues—poor connectivity, insufficient platform capacity, and inadequate technical support—reflect a broader institutional gap between technological installation and genuine integration. This gap defines MTU's current stage of digitalization: a space where ambition outpaces capability, and where discourse outpaces implementation.

3.4 Teaching and Learning Practices: The Myth of Hybrid Transformation

Teaching practices at MTU have adopted the vocabulary of the digital era, including "blended learning," "online classes," and "digital assessment." However, classroom observation and participant testimonies show that much of this digitalization remains performative. In many cases, lecturers upload PDFs to the LMS to fulfill policy compliance, while actual engagement continues offline.

Table 4. Pedagogical Implementation Reality

Pedagogical Element	Expected Practice	Observed Practice	Critical Reflection
Learning Delivery	Interactive online platforms	Predominantly one-way uploads	Technology used as a repository, not an interaction space
Assessment	Continuous digital assessment	Manual grading reintroduced	Resistance due to system instability
Student Participation	Forum discussions and digital collaboration	Minimal participation	Digital fatigue and lack of motivation
Lecturer Feedback	Instant feedback via LMS	Delayed responses	Overburdened with technical issues

Students express disappointment that “digital learning” often translates to extra workload rather than creative engagement. Lecturers, constrained by limited training and infrastructure, reproduce conventional teaching within a digital shell. As one student noted during the interview:

"Sometimes the lecturers come late to Zoom meetings, or the class ends abruptly because of unstable connections. There is no digital attendance system, and even the lecturer's voice often cuts off. It does not feel like digital learning—it feels like waiting for the signal to return."

Another student shared a similar experience, describing digital learning as a routine of frustration rather than innovation:

"We submit assignments online, but there is no interaction, no discussion. It is just the same lecture moved to a screen."

These testimonies expose how the promise of flexibility and creativity in digital education has been replaced by monotony and technical struggle. What emerges is not a hybrid revolution, but a hybrid illusion—a learning environment that borrows the language of modernization while perpetuating traditional, one-way pedagogies under the guise of technology [19], [20], [21], [22]. The failure to provide reliable systems and structured digital engagement underscores the absence of institutional coherence, revealing that MTU's digitalization remains more symbolic than substantive.

3.5 Human Resources: The Burden of Small Numbers

MTU's academic community comprises five lecturers, 15 students, and 3 administrative staff. While the small size allows for close interaction, it also exposes systemic fragility: limited capacity, overlapping duties, and a lack of professional specialization in digital management.

Table 5. Human Resources Structure

Category	Number	Function	Critical Observation
Lecturers	5	Deliver teaching, manage LMS content	Skilled but undertrained in e-learning pedagogy
Students	15	Engage in hybrid learning	Motivated but digitally unassisted
Administrative Staff	3	Oversee digital operations and support	Overloaded, lacking IT specialization
Total	23	—	Sustainability risk if enrollment increases

The overreliance on a handful of individuals makes digital implementation precarious. When one lecturer struggles, the system trembles [23], [24]. When an administrator resigns, digital continuity stalls. This fragile dependency undermines institutional resilience and raises a crucial question: can digitalization truly thrive in an environment that still depends on human improvisation rather than structured support?

3.6 Critical Reflection: Between Promise and Pretense

From a critical standpoint, the digitalization of learning at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University illustrates a tension between the inevitability of modernization and the illusion of progress.

The inevitability arises from global educational trends and post-pandemic demands—no institution can escape digital transformation. However, the illusion manifests when digitalization is framed as a technological achievement rather than a cultural and pedagogical shift.

Table 6. Synthesis of Critical Findings

Analytical Dimension	Evidence	Critical Insight
Institutional Policy	Strong narrative but weak enactment	Modernity as discourse, not praxis
Infrastructure	Established but fragile	Progress measured by presence, not performance
Pedagogy	Mechanically digital	Repetition of analog pedagogy within digital shells
Human Resources	Committed but overloaded	Sustainability crisis looming
Learning Impact	Marginal improvement	Digitalization is not yet transformative

The digital transformation of MTU, therefore, stands on the threshold between aspiration and authenticity. The institution has entered the digital vocabulary but not yet the digital culture. As a result, what is celebrated as innovation may, in truth, be a polished illusion of inevitability.

Nevertheless, the critique here is not destructive but diagnostic. MTU's experience mirrors that of many emerging universities in Indonesia—eager to modernize, yet constrained by structure, habit, and hierarchy. True transformation demands not more devices or faster internet, but a deeper reimagination of how knowledge is created, shared, and lived in the digital age [25], [26], [27], [28].

The findings reveal a fundamental dissonance between the institutional rhetoric of digital transformation and the everyday realities experienced by lecturers, students, and administrative staff. While Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU) has formally embraced the discourse of digitalization, the implementation remains fragmented, reactive, and largely symbolic [29], [30], [31], [32]. The university speaks the language of modernization, yet its operational structures and resource allocations do not consistently reflect a coherent digital vision.

This gap is rooted in a lack of vertical and horizontal alignment across institutional actors. The Foundation, as the governing body, has articulated an ambitious vision for digital advancement but has not translated that ambition into systemic capacity-building or sustainable infrastructure [33], [34], [35]. The rectorate, positioned as the executor of strategic policy, struggles to harmonize administrative expectations with the pedagogical realities faced by lecturers. Meanwhile, lecturers and students—the primary agents of learning—navigate digital initiatives with limited guidance, resources, and shared understanding of goals. The critical insight here is that digitalization cannot thrive in an institutional vacuum. Technology is not merely a tool but a culture—one that requires congruence of intent, policy, and practice. Without alignment between the Foundation's strategic aspirations, the rector's managerial directives, and the academic community's pedagogical engagement, digital transformation risks becoming an ornamental agenda: a performance of progress rather than its substance.

To move beyond discourse, the rector must take an active role in mediating and synchronizing these diverse visions [36], [37], [38], [39]. Strategic leadership should prioritize dialogical planning—bringing the Foundation, academic staff, and students into a shared conversation about what digital learning truly means for MTU. The university needs a living vision, not a declarative slogan; a mission grounded in practice, not policy alone.

True digital transformation requires institutional coherence: an ecosystem where technology serves pedagogy, management supports innovation, and policy empowers human creativity. Only through such integrative alignment can MTU move from aspiration to authenticity—from the illusion of inevitability to the reality of transformation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that the digitalization of learning at Mahkota Tricom Unggul University (MTU) remains in a transitional and uneven stage. While digital rhetoric has been widely adopted in the university's strategic documents and public discourse, its systemic integration into academic practices remains limited. The digital infrastructure exists, but the pedagogical culture to sustain it has not yet matured.

First, the analysis suggests that digital learning has not been fully integrated into academic activities. Implementation depends mainly on individual lecturer initiative rather than a coordinated institutional framework. This decentralization has led to inconsistent practices and unequal digital readiness among study programs.

Second, several key driving factors were identified: leadership commitment at the rectoral level, lecturer enthusiasm for pedagogical innovation, and students' willingness to engage with hybrid learning modes. However, barriers such as inadequate technical infrastructure, limited professional development, and unclear institutional policies continue to hinder full adoption.

Third, a clear gap persists between the university's formal vision of becoming a modern, technology-driven institution and the actual realities of its academic operations. The Foundation's strategic plans emphasize digital growth, yet operational and budgetary priorities do not sufficiently support this agenda. The misalignment between institutional ambition and operational capacity has resulted in what can be termed "discursive digitalization"—a condition in which technology is discussed more than it is meaningfully applied.

Fourth, the perceptions of lecturers and students reflect ambivalence. Some see digital learning as an inevitable direction for higher education in Indonesia. In contrast, others perceive it as an administrative illusion—an obligation imposed from above without adequate preparation or support. This tension underscores the need for a more participatory and inclusive approach to digital transformation.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge:

1. Strategic Alignment

The rector must play a central role in bridging the vision of the Foundation with the practical realities of academic life. Institutional policies should be co-created through consultation with lecturers and students.

2. Capacity Building

Systematic and continuous training for lecturers and administrative staff should be prioritized to build both technical competence and digital pedagogy.

3. Infrastructure and Support

Investment in digital infrastructure must be matched with technical support units capable of maintaining systems and assisting users.

4. Cultural Integration

Digitalization should be framed not merely as a modernization project but as a cultural transformation that redefines teaching, learning, and institutional identity.

5. Monitoring and Reflection

Regular evaluations should be conducted to measure progress, identify obstacles, and ensure that digital practices align with MTU's educational philosophy.

In conclusion, digitalization at MTU stands at a crossroads between aspiration and authenticity. The university possesses the language of innovation but has yet to internalize its practice. Moving forward, the challenge is not simply to digitize education, but to humanize it—to ensure that technology amplifies rather than replaces the essence of meaningful learning.

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