

CHAPTER 3

THEORY AND METHODS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Student Psychological Support in the AI-Driven University: Digital Well-Being, Risk Prevention, and Human-Centred Care

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Abstract. The digitalization of society and the rapid development of artificial intelligence are transforming students' academic, social, and psychological experiences. Digital platforms, online learning environments, social media, AI assistants, learning analytics, and mental health chatbots create new opportunities for psychological support, early identification of distress, personalized guidance, and wider access to help. At the same time, they may intensify loneliness, digital fatigue, social comparison, academic pressure, privacy concerns, overreliance on automated advice, and unequal access to professional care. The objective of this article is to analyse the need for psychological support for students in the context of societal digitalization and AI development and to propose a human-centred model of AI-supported psychological care in higher education. The article applies a qualitative review methodology based on literature synthesis, document analysis, and conceptual modelling. The selection of sources prioritized academic relevance, methodological clarity, recency, citation value, and direct connection with the research topic. The analysis integrates research on student mental health, digital mental health interventions, AI-supported psychological support, chatbot-based care, academic stress, digital well-being, and ethical governance of AI in higher education. The article demonstrates that psychological support for students is becoming a strategic function of universities rather than an auxiliary student service. Statistical evidence shows high levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, loneliness, and help-seeking among college students. AI can support psychological care through early screening, triage, psychoeducation, self-help tools, personalized recommendations, crisis signposting, and continuous low-threshold support. However, AI-based tools cannot replace professional counselling because they raise risks related to accuracy, emotional safety, privacy, bias, crisis response, and dependence on automated interaction. Universities need integrated psychological support systems that combine professional counselling, peer support, digital mental health services, AI-assisted screening, ethical data governance, academic staff training, and crisis escalation protocols. AI should be used as a supervised support layer, not as a substitute for human psychological care.

Keywords: student mental health; psychological support; artificial intelligence; digitalization; higher education; digital well-being; AI chatbots; university counselling; mental health services; ethical AI; student support.

JEL Classification: I12; I18; I21; I23; I28; O33

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Introduction. Student mental health has become one of the most urgent challenges for higher education systems. Universities are no longer responsible only for academic instruction, professional preparation, and research development. They are also expected to create psychologically safe learning environments in which students can cope with academic pressure, social transition, financial uncertainty, digital overload, identity formation, and rapid technological change. The need for psychological support is especially important in the context of societal digitalization and the development of artificial intelligence, because students increasingly study, communicate, work, search for help, and construct their identities in digital environments.

The scale of the problem is confirmed by international evidence. The WHO World Mental Health International College Student Project found that 35% of full-time first-year students screened positive for at least one lifetime common mental disorder and 31% screened positive for at least one 12-month disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018). The Healthy Minds Study 2024–2025 reported that 37% of college students had moderate or severe depressive symptoms, 32% had moderate or severe anxiety symptoms, and 11% reported suicidal ideation in the past year (Healthy Minds Network, 2025). These indicators show that psychological support is not a marginal issue but a core condition of student success and institutional resilience.

Digitalization has transformed both the causes of psychological distress and the ways in which support can be provided. Online learning, hybrid education, algorithmic platforms, social media, constant connectivity, academic monitoring systems, digital assessment, and AI assistants have changed students' daily routines. These technologies may increase flexibility and access to learning, but they may also contribute to fatigue, distraction, comparison pressure, reduced social connection, blurred boundaries between study and rest, and dependence on digital feedback.

Artificial intelligence adds another layer to this transformation. AI can help universities identify students at risk, provide scalable psychoeducation, support self-regulation, offer chatbot-based initial assistance, analyse patterns in help-seeking, and guide students toward appropriate services. AI-based chatbots are already being studied as possible instruments for supporting university students with anxiety and depression, although such tools remain limited and require careful supervision (Klos et al., 2021).

This article argues that universities need a new psychological support architecture for the AI-driven digital society. Such architecture should integrate human counselling, digital mental health interventions, AI-assisted support, peer networks, academic staff awareness, data governance, and crisis escalation mechanisms. The central question is not whether AI should be used in student psychological support, but how it can be used safely, ethically, and inclusively.

Literature Review. The literature on student mental health shows that psychological distress among university students is widespread and multidimensional. Auerbach et al. (2018) demonstrated that mental disorders among first-year college students are common across countries and often begin before university entry. This means that universities receive many students who already have psychological vulnerabilities, while academic transition, social pressure, financial concerns, and digital learning demands may intensify existing difficulties.

The Healthy Minds Study provides further evidence that depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-injury, loneliness, and use of psychological services remain highly relevant issues in college populations (Healthy Minds Network, 2025). This evidence is important because it shows that universities need not only emergency responses but also preventive systems, early identification mechanisms, and accessible support pathways. In the digital university, such pathways increasingly depend on the integration of human services and digital channels.

Research on digital mental health interventions has expanded in response to the growing demand for scalable and accessible support. Harrer et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of internet interventions for university students' mental health and found that such interventions can be useful, especially for anxiety, depression, and stress-related outcomes. Lattie et al. (2019) also concluded that digital mental health interventions can improve depression, anxiety, and psychological well-being among college students, although the authors emphasized the need for stronger evidence, better engagement, and improved implementation in real campus settings. These findings suggest that digital support can extend university services, but its effectiveness depends on design quality, student engagement, and institutional integration.

The development of AI-based psychological tools has created new possibilities. Klos et al. (2021) tested an artificial intelligence chatbot for anxiety and depression in university students and found that chatbot-based support may be viable and acceptable. This does not mean that AI tools can replace therapy, but it suggests that AI may serve as an accessible first point of contact, especially for students who are reluctant to seek traditional counselling.

The literature also indicates that AI and digital tools may influence student well-being beyond direct mental health interventions. AI assistants, recommendation systems, learning analytics, automated feedback, and digital assessment systems increasingly shape the academic experience. These tools may reduce uncertainty and provide support, but they may also increase pressure, create anxiety about performance monitoring, and make students feel constantly evaluated. Therefore, student psychological support must be connected with broader digital well-being policies.

At the same time, studies on large language models and mental health emphasize caution. AI-based tools may offer immediate, non-judgmental, and low-stigma interaction, but they may also provide inaccurate advice, fail to detect crisis signals, reinforce harmful beliefs, or create emotional dependence. These risks are particularly serious when students are isolated, distressed, or reluctant to contact professional services. Therefore, AI should be framed as a supportive layer within a broader care system rather than as an independent therapist.

The literature reveals several gaps. First, many studies examine either student mental health or AI tools separately, while fewer studies connect digitalization, AI use, university support systems, and student psychological care in one framework. Second, research on AI mental health chatbots often focuses on feasibility and acceptability, but less attention is paid to institutional governance, ethical responsibility, and integration with university counselling services. Third, there is limited evidence on how AI-supported psychological support affects diverse student groups, including international students, students with disabilities, first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with previous mental health difficulties. Fourth, more research is needed on the relationship between digital academic environments, AI-driven learning systems, digital fatigue, loneliness, and student well-being. Fifth, universities need clearer conceptual models for combining human support, digital tools, AI assistance, and crisis escalation.

This article addresses these gaps by proposing a layered and human-centred AI-supported psychological support model for higher education.

Aims. The purpose of this article is to analyse the need for psychological support for students in the context of societal digitalization and the development of artificial intelligence, and to propose a safe, inclusive, and human-centred model of AI-supported psychological care in universities.

The article explains why psychological support has become a strategic necessity for higher education institutions, examines how digitalization and AI affect student well-being, and systematizes the main psychological risks faced by students in digital learning environments. It also identifies the opportunities and limitations of AI-supported psychological support, compares traditional, digital, and AI-assisted support formats, and defines the ethical and organizational requirements for responsible implementation.

Methodology. This article applies a qualitative review methodology based on literature synthesis, document analysis, and conceptual modelling. The study combines peer-reviewed academic literature on student mental health, digital mental health interventions, AI-supported psychological support, mental health chatbots, higher education counselling, digital well-being, and ethical AI with verified institutional and statistical sources related to student mental health and digital care.

The literature review was organized around five thematic areas: student mental health in higher education; digitalization and student well-being; digital mental health interventions; AI and chatbot-based psychological support; and ethical governance of AI in student services. The selection of sources prioritized academic relevance, methodological clarity, recency, citation value, and direct connection with the research topic.

The conceptual part of the methodology develops a layered ecosystem model of AI-supported psychological support in universities. The model treats AI as a supervised auxiliary layer that can strengthen early detection, psychoeducation, triage, and navigation, but not replace professional counselling, clinical judgement, or crisis intervention. The article does not present original empirical survey data. Statistical evidence from international studies and reports is used to illustrate the scale of student psychological needs and justify the proposed framework.

Results. The need for psychological support in higher education can be justified not only through general observations about student stress but also through empirical evidence on the prevalence of mental health problems among university students. Available international data demonstrate that psychological distress is widespread and affects a significant proportion of students. These indicators are especially important in the context of digitalization because online and hybrid learning environments may increase both flexibility and psychological vulnerability. Table 1 summarizes selected evidence that demonstrates why psychological support should be treated as a core function of universities.

Table 1. Evidence matrix on student mental health and psychological support needs

Indicator	Result	Interpretation for universities
First-year college students screening positive for at least one lifetime common mental disorder	35%	Many students enter university with pre-existing psychological vulnerability
First-year college students screening positive for at least one 12-month disorder	31%	Universities need early identification and transition support
Moderate or severe depressive symptoms among college students	37%	Psychological support should be integrated with academic success strategies
Moderate or severe anxiety symptoms among college students	32%	Stress-management and anxiety support should be widely available
Suicidal ideation in the past year among college students	11%	Crisis protocols and referral systems are essential
Mental health therapy or counselling in the past year	38%	Demand for services is high and requires scalable support systems
Psychiatric medication in the past year	29%	Universities need coordination between counselling, health services, and external care

Source: systematized by the author based on Auerbach et al. (2018) and Healthy Minds Network (2025).

The data presented in Table 1 show that universities cannot approach student mental health as an exceptional or marginal problem. A substantial proportion of students enter higher education with existing psychological

vulnerabilities, while others develop symptoms during their studies. The high prevalence of depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, suicidal ideation, and counselling use indicates that psychological support must be integrated into educational management, academic advising, student welfare, and digital learning policy.

These indicators are also important because they reveal the limits of traditional counselling models. If demand for psychological support is high, universities may not be able to respond only through individual face-to-face counselling. This does not mean that professional counselling should be replaced. Rather, it means that universities need multi-level systems combining prevention, early identification, psychoeducation, peer support, digital tools, and professional intervention.

Digitalization as a source of psychological pressure and support. Digitalization changes the psychological conditions of student life. Learning management systems, social media, online classes, AI assistants, digital assessment platforms, and learning analytics influence how students study, communicate, compare themselves with others, and experience academic pressure. These technologies may support inclusion and flexibility, but they may also create new forms of psychological strain. Table 2 presents the ambivalent effects of digitalization on student well-being.

Table 2. Digital risk–support matrix for student psychological well-being

Digital factor	Potential benefit	Psychological risk
Online and hybrid learning	Flexibility and access for diverse students	Isolation, fatigue, weaker belonging
Learning management systems	Structured academic communication	Constant task visibility and performance pressure
Social media	Peer connection and informal support	Comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out
Learning analytics	Early detection of disengagement	Surveillance anxiety and data misuse concerns
AI assistants	Immediate explanations and low-stigma help	Overreliance, misinformation, emotional dependence
Digital mental health platforms	Scalable support and self-help	Unequal access, weak engagement, privacy concerns

Source: developed by the author based on Harrer et al. (2019), Lattie et al. (2019), Klos et al. (2021), and Miao and Holmes (2023).

The comparison in Table 2 demonstrates that digitalization should not be evaluated only through the lens of technological efficiency. Each digital tool can support students and create psychological risks at the same time. For example, online learning increases access for students with employment, family responsibilities, disabilities, or geographical barriers. However, it may also reduce informal social contact and weaken the sense of belonging. Similarly, learning analytics may help detect disengagement, but students may perceive constant monitoring as surveillance.

This duality means that universities should develop digital well-being policies. Such policies should address not only access to technology but also workload regulation, communication norms, screen fatigue, privacy, digital boundaries, and responsible AI use. Psychological support should therefore be connected with digital education strategy.

Opportunities and limitations of AI-supported psychological support. AI-supported psychological tools are increasingly discussed as a possible response to the growing demand for student mental health support. Their potential lies in scalability, availability, privacy of first contact, and capacity to provide immediate guidance. However, psychological care is a sensitive area in which technological solutions must be used carefully. Table 3 compares the main opportunities and limitations of AI-supported psychological care.

Table 3. AI support matrix for student psychological care

AI-supported function	Opportunity	Limitation
Psychoeducation	Explains stress, anxiety, sleep, coping, and help-seeking	May provide generic or incomplete information
Self-help guidance	Offers breathing exercises, journaling prompts, and behavioural activation	May not be sufficient for severe distress
Screening and triage	Helps identify students who may need support	False positives and false negatives are possible
Chatbot support	Provides low-threshold, always-available interaction	Cannot replace therapeutic relationship
Crisis signposting	Can direct students to emergency resources	Must have robust escalation protocols
Data-informed planning	Helps universities understand demand patterns	Requires strict privacy and governance
Personalized recommendations	Matches students with resources	Risk of bias or inappropriate recommendation

Source: systematized by the author based on Klos et al. (2021), Harrer et al. (2019), Lattie et al. (2019), and Miao and Holmes (2023).

Table 3 shows that AI-supported tools are most appropriate for low-risk and early-stage support functions. They may help students understand stress, reflect on emotions, practise self-help exercises, or find relevant university services. These functions are valuable because they can reduce barriers to help-seeking and support students before problems intensify.

At the same time, the limitations are serious. AI tools may misunderstand context, provide incomplete guidance, fail to detect crisis situations, or respond in ways that are emotionally inappropriate. For this reason, universities should avoid presenting AI tools as therapeutic substitutes. Their role should be clearly defined as supportive, educational, and navigational. Professional counsellors and psychologists should remain responsible for diagnosis, therapy, crisis management, and complex cases.

Layered ecosystem model of student psychological support. The proposed model is based on the assumption that student psychological support in the AI-driven university should not be organized as a purely

technological service. The student remains at the centre of the support ecosystem, while AI functions only as one of the surrounding layers. This is important because psychological distress is rarely caused by a single factor. It usually emerges from the interaction of academic pressure, social isolation, financial uncertainty, digital fatigue, identity challenges, and personal vulnerability.

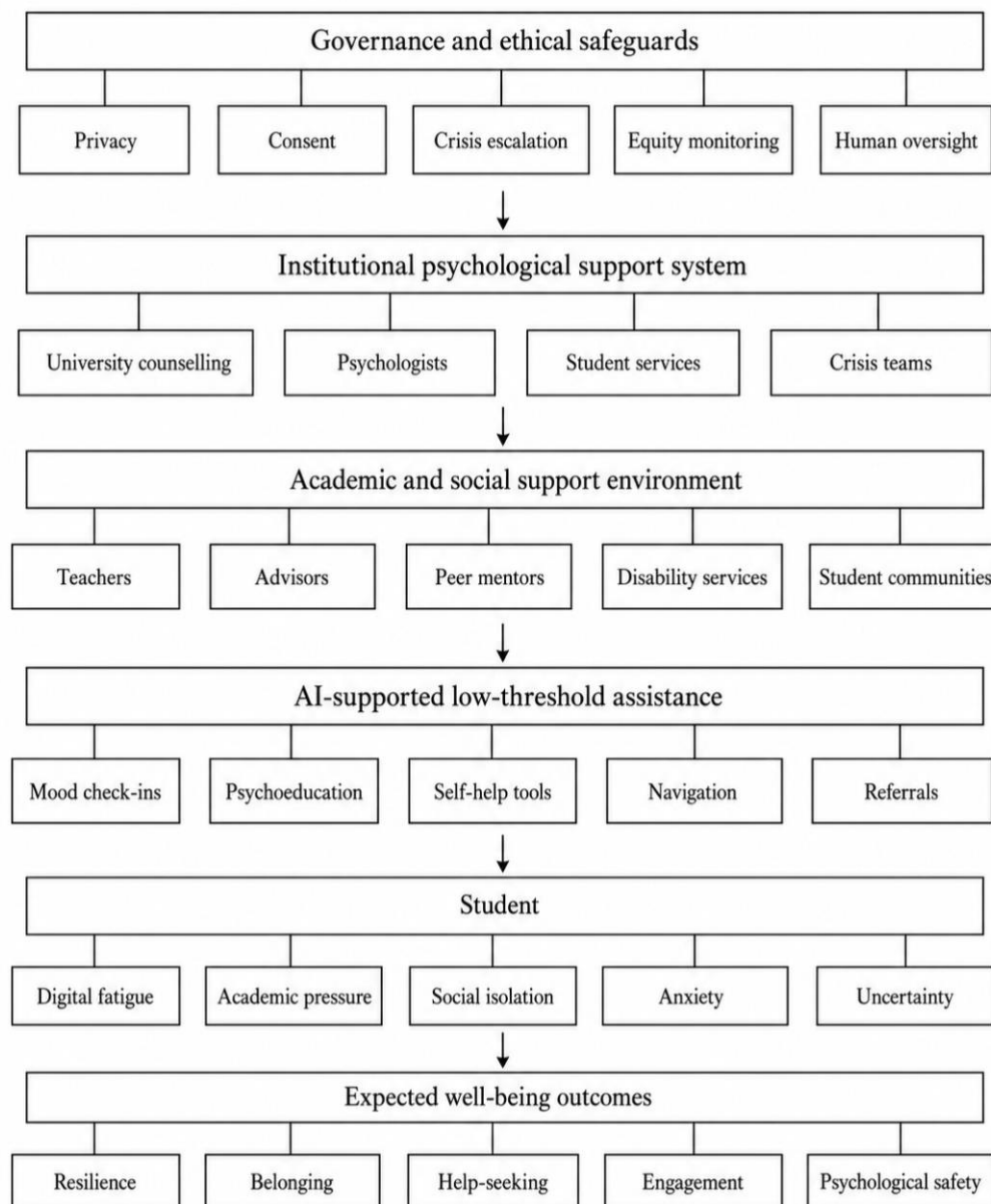


Figure 1. Layered ecosystem of student psychological support in the AI-driven university

Source: developed by the author based on Harrer et al. (2019), Lattie et al. (2019), Klos et al. (2021), Miao and Holmes (2023), and Auerbach et al. (2018).

The first layer around the student is AI-supported low-threshold assistance. This layer may include mood check-ins, psychoeducational

content, self-help exercises, appointment navigation, and referral suggestions. Its function is to reduce the initial barrier to help-seeking. Many students hesitate to contact counsellors directly because of stigma, uncertainty, fear of disclosure, or lack of knowledge about available services. AI tools can therefore act as an entry point into the support system.

The second layer is the academic and social support environment. Teachers, academic advisors, peer mentors, disability services, and student communities are important because they interact with students in everyday educational situations. They may notice changes in behaviour, academic disengagement, isolation, or emotional difficulties before these problems become crises.

The third layer is the institutional psychological support system, which includes university counsellors, psychologists, student support services, and crisis teams. This layer remains irreplaceable because professional judgement, therapeutic communication, ethical responsibility, and crisis intervention cannot be delegated to AI systems.

The outer layer consists of governance and ethical safeguards. Privacy protection, informed consent, human oversight, crisis escalation, and equity monitoring are necessary to ensure that AI-supported psychological support does not create new risks for vulnerable students. In this model, AI is not a substitute for human care but a supervised tool that may improve access, navigation, and early engagement.

Implementation requirements for universities. The implementation of AI-supported psychological support requires institutional planning. Universities should not introduce AI tools only because they are innovative or cost-effective. In the field of mental health, poor implementation may create psychological, ethical, and legal risks. Table 4 proposes an implementation roadmap that connects AI use with institutional responsibility.

The implementation framework in Table 4 highlights that AI-supported psychological care must be embedded in university governance. Needs assessment is necessary to understand the scale and character of student difficulties. Ethical policy is required to define the boundaries of AI use. Human oversight ensures that AI outputs are not treated as independent clinical decisions. Crisis escalation protocols are essential for cases involving suicidal ideation, self-harm, abuse, or severe distress.

The framework also emphasizes student AI literacy. Students should understand that AI tools can provide general support, but they cannot replace professional psychological care. They should also know what happens to their data, when human staff may be involved, and how to access urgent help. Finally, equity monitoring is necessary because AI tools may not work equally well for all student groups.

Table 4. Implementation roadmap for AI-supported student psychological support

Stage	Institutional action	Expected result
Needs assessment	Analyse student mental health indicators, service demand, and digital barriers	Evidence-based support planning
Ethical policy	Define allowed uses of AI, consent rules, privacy protection, and accountability	Trust and legal compliance
Human oversight	Ensure counsellors supervise AI-supported tools and referral pathways	Safety and quality control
Crisis escalation	Create protocols for suicidal ideation, self-harm, abuse, and severe distress	Rapid response and risk reduction
Student AI literacy	Teach students what AI can and cannot do in mental health support	Reduced overreliance and safer use
Equity monitoring	Check access and outcomes for vulnerable student groups	Inclusive support
Continuous evaluation	Collect feedback and assess psychological and academic outcomes	Improvement and sustainability

Source: developed by the author based on Miao and Holmes (2023), Lattie et al. (2019), Klos et al. (2021), and Healthy Minds Network (2025).

International students, students with disabilities, students with limited digital access, or students experiencing severe distress may require additional forms of support.

Discussion. The results of this review demonstrate that psychological support for students should be understood as part of the educational infrastructure of the AI-driven university. In the past, student counselling was often treated as a separate welfare service. In the contemporary digital university, however, psychological support is closely connected with academic success, retention, inclusion, digital learning quality, and institutional reputation. Students who experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, or digital fatigue may find it difficult to participate fully in learning, maintain motivation, complete assignments, communicate with teachers, and plan their future careers.

Digitalization changes both the sources of distress and the possible forms of support. Online learning can increase flexibility, but it can also reduce spontaneous communication and increase isolation. Learning platforms can organize academic work, but they can also make students feel constantly monitored. AI assistants can provide immediate help, but they can also create dependency or false confidence. These contradictions show that technological innovation in education must be accompanied by psychological, ethical, and pedagogical reflection.

The role of AI in student psychological support should therefore be defined carefully. AI can support early engagement, psychoeducation, self-help, and navigation. It can help students take the first step toward support when they are not ready to contact a human professional. It can also help universities manage high demand by directing students to appropriate resources. However, AI cannot understand the full complexity of a student's life situation, family context, trauma history, cultural background, or

emotional state. Human professionals remain essential because psychological care depends on empathy, trust, interpretation, ethical judgement, and responsibility.

The proposed model is based on the principle of layered support. Students should not be left alone with AI tools. Instead, AI should be placed within a wider ecosystem that includes counsellors, teachers, advisors, peer mentors, disability services, crisis teams, and governance mechanisms. This approach allows universities to benefit from the scalability of AI while preserving the safety and depth of human care.

A further important issue is institutional trust. Students may avoid AI-supported services if they fear surveillance, data misuse, or academic consequences. Therefore, universities must communicate clearly how data are collected, stored, protected, and used. Trust is especially important in psychological support because students disclose sensitive experiences, emotions, and vulnerabilities. Without trust, even technically advanced systems may fail.

Finally, the article suggests that psychological support in the AI era should be preventive rather than only reactive. Universities should not wait until students reach crisis points. They should develop systems that promote resilience, belonging, digital well-being, emotional literacy, and help-seeking. AI may contribute to this preventive approach, but only when it is ethically governed and integrated with professional human support.

Conclusions. The article concludes that psychological support for students is becoming a strategic necessity in the context of digitalization and AI development. The growing prevalence of depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and demand for counselling demonstrates that universities must treat mental health as a core condition of educational quality. Student well-being affects learning outcomes, retention, academic engagement, institutional trust, and long-term professional development.

The analysis shows that digitalization has a dual impact on student well-being. It creates new opportunities for flexible learning, digital counselling, self-help, and early support, but it also generates risks related to isolation, digital fatigue, social comparison, constant connectivity, surveillance anxiety, and dependence on automated systems. Therefore, psychological support in higher education should be redesigned for the realities of the digital university.

AI-supported tools may become useful components of student support systems, especially for psychoeducation, low-threshold engagement, self-help guidance, resource navigation, and early identification of distress. However, AI should not be positioned as a replacement for university counsellors, psychologists, teachers, advisors, or crisis teams. Its role should be auxiliary, supervised, and clearly limited.

The proposed layered model of AI-supported psychological support emphasizes that student care requires several interconnected levels: AI-

supported first contact, academic and social support, professional psychological services, and governance safeguards. This model can help universities design support systems that are scalable, inclusive, ethical, and human-centred.

Future research should empirically test the effectiveness of hybrid psychological support models in universities. It is especially important to examine how different student groups perceive AI-supported tools, whether such tools increase help-seeking, and how they affect students with severe psychological distress. Further studies should also investigate the relationship between digital learning environments, AI use, academic pressure, and long-term mental health outcomes.

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