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Is Generative Artificial Intelligence a Social *Other* for Parasocial Support in a Loneliness Epidemic?

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is increasingly being used in higher education not only for academic tasks, but as a form of social support. Students are turning to GenAI for reassurance, planning, emotional regulation, and rehearsal of difficult conversations, often in private and outside institutional view. And universities are rapidly introducing chatbots and social AI into their support services to 'scale' student wellbeing. This Commentary argues that GenAI can function as a low-risk social other that supports temporary psychological safety and parasocial bonding, but cannot sustain the mutuality and embodied connections that underpin durable belonging. Drawing on emerging interdisciplinary evidence, it examines how GenAI may alleviate short-term distress while also reshaping help-seeking, peer interaction, and the social infrastructure of learning. It then considers how students, academics, and institutions are adopting GenAI for different reasons and with different risks, resulting in diffused responsibility for wellbeing outcomes. We conclude by calling for higher education research, policy, and practice to address GenAI as part of students' relational ecosystems, with clear boundaries, transparency, and complementarity with human services. The central claim is that GenAI's growing role in student wellbeing should be read as a signal of unmet human needs within contemporary higher education, not as a scalable replacement for connection.

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Practitioner Notes

1. GenAI is already being used by students for social support, not just as a study tool.
2. GenAI can provide low-risk reassurance, but it fails to create mutual care or durable belonging.
3. Student GenAI support use is mostly private, so institutions should not assume they can "see" it.
4. University chatbots and automated assistants are shaping student care pathways, so GenAI policy must cover support and responsibility, not only academic integrity.
5. Design GenAI support for boundaries and human handoff, not substitution

Keywords

GenAI, artificial intelligence, belonging, social support, loneliness.

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Introduction

Higher education exists within a wider social context marked by rising loneliness, social fragmentation, and social disconnection. Across multiple countries and age groups, loneliness is increasing, polarisation is growing, and social cohesion is declining (Ross, 2024). Loneliness is now widely recognised as a public health concern, with particular salience for university students who are navigating academic pressure, precarious employment, financial stress, and sometimes relocation and independence from families for the first time. There is also the matter of the increasingly transactional institutional relationships that students may have, both with their university and with each other (Murthy, 2023). Such a transition towards consumption or transaction logic may enable students to graduate, but without a deep sense of lifelong social connection that learning environments can offer. These conditions form the backdrop against which new technologies, including generative artificial intelligence, are being taken up in students' lives as possible antidotes to feeling a lack of belonging and connection (Crawford et al., 2024).

The causes of this disconnection are complex and cumulative. It is possible that the massification of higher education has reduced the kinds of small classroom experiences that foster sustained relational engagement. Digital learning environments, while expanding access and flexibility, have often fragmented peer interaction and reduced informal contact with educators. The post-pandemic university has further normalised distance learning, asynchronous participation, and compressed teaching relationships (Crawford et al., 2024). At the same time, support services are under strain, with long waiting lists for counselling, advising, and learning support which mirror broader population statistics indicating rising mental health problems and reduced access to psychological support in the community (Hayne, 2017). Students are therefore required to manage uncertainty, anxiety, and decision-making with fewer relational resources than previous cohorts, even as expectations of performance and resilience continue to rise. One practical offset that has occurred implicitly is the emergence of grade inflation (Bachan, 2017). Yet, areas where grade inflation has been more prevalent seems not to have reduced student anxiety.

Ironically, the vast improvements in communications technology may be contributing to the loneliness epidemic. A recent review by Baumeister et al. (2026) found that technology-mediated communication elicits less psychological load (e.g., emotional intensity) and engagement than face-to-face interactions. A number of studies in that review also found that learning was generally slower or inferior in quality when students interact via technology instead of being in the same place as the instructor. As more and more people interact with others across temporal and spatial distance, thus socialising while physically alone, their social life may become less satisfying. Those who use technological communication to enrich rather than replace face-to-face relationships may gain, however (Smith et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, generative AI has emerged as a potential response to loneliness, social disconnection, and support (Kim et al., 2022). In health, wellbeing, and everyday life, GenAI systems are increasingly positioned as low-threshold support tools offering availability, responsiveness, and non-judgemental interaction (Pani et al., 2024). Research and public discourse in these domains furnish mixed evaluations. Some work highlights benefits associated with reassurance, emotional regulation, and reduced barriers to disclosure, while other scholarship raises concerns about dependency, substitution of human care and accountability. In

short, there is mixed evidence about a conceptual link for GenAI and its capacity to foster mutual recognition, accountability, and care. Many AI companies are already capitalising on this gap in services, but more importantly, from even just a cursory glance at the daily news, it is clear that this debate is already well underway outside education (APA, 2025), even as higher education research has largely focused elsewhere.

Within higher education, discussion of GenAI has been dominated by academic integrity and assessment reform (Bearman et al., 2023). While these concerns are legitimate, they obscure another predominant form of use: that is, students, engaging with GenAI for social and emotional purposes, such as to rehearse difficult conversations, plan study and life decisions, articulate uncertainty, and to seek out ways to cope with moments of stress, particularly in respect to academic stressors. And in some research, it is argued that students cannot tell whether they are engaging with a GenAI or a human counsellor (Kuhail et al., 2024). These practices are largely invisible to educators and institutions, yet they sit squarely within the student experience. As with earlier technologies, student use of GenAI has outpaced both policy and scholarship, creating a conceptual gap between what higher education research examines and how students are actually engaging with GenAI (Chen et al., 2020).

This Commentary builds directly on earlier work published in this journal that positioned generative AI as an ethical, pedagogical, and leadership challenge rather than a purely technical one (Crawford et al., 2023). Our previous work argued that GenAI should be understood in relation to learning, people, and wellbeing, not simply as a risk to be managed. However, while early Commentary acknowledged the potential of GenAI to support student autonomy and confidence, its role as a form of social or relational support has not yet been examined in depth within higher education scholarship; and indeed there are mixed reviews on to what extent GenAI can actually substitute human presence (Crawford et al., 2024; Hou et al., 2025; Wang & Zu, 2026). This Commentary extends that trajectory by focusing explicitly on GenAI as a social presence in students' learning lives.

Drawing on Purvis et al.'s (2024) call for editorials to surface under-theorised problems, challenge dominant framings, and reorient scholarly attention toward issues of growing significance, the objective of this Commentary is not to advocate for GenAI as a solution to student loneliness, nor to frame it as an inherent threat. Rather, its purpose is to interrogate what the growing use of GenAI for reassurance, planning, and emotional sense-making reveals about contemporary conditions of belonging, psychological safety, and support in higher education. In doing so, it seeks to shift the conversation from what GenAI does to why students are turning to it and what responsibilities this creates for educators and institutions.

The Commentary first examines whether GenAI functions as a low-risk social other before considering its relationship to loneliness, belonging, and parasocial support. It then explores how students, academics, and institutions are engaging with GenAI for social and support-oriented purposes, often in uncoordinated and ethically ambiguous ways. Finally, it considers how higher education research and practice might respond, not through substitution or prohibition, but through clearer conceptualisation of care, boundaries, and responsibility in an GenAI-mediated landscape. The significance of this work lies in its insistence that generative artificial intelligence is not only an educational technology but a relational one. By addressing GenAI's role in students'

social and emotional lives, this Commentary invites higher education scholars and educators to confront a deeply human problem: how learning, belonging, and support are experienced under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. Ignoring this dimension risks keeping institutional responses to GenAI narrowly technical, while students continue to use these systems to meet needs that higher education has struggled to address through human means alone.

Is GenAI a Low-Risk Social *Other*?

For many students, the appeal of generative artificial intelligence begins with its technical capabilities (e.g., referencing, writing, editing, searching), but has increasingly expanded to include social conditions once enacted only through humans (e.g., asking for guidance on daily life). Where students once needed to ask a peer, teacher, or librarian for academic support, they now have immediate access to support through a multitude of GenAI tools. GenAI systems are consistently available, respond predictably, and do not express judgement or disapproval. People who use GenAI value these systems precisely because they lower barriers to engagement, even while recognising limits around emotional depth, trust, and the handling of complex personal issues (Chan, 2025). These features make them feel accessible in moments when human support is unavailable, delayed, or perceived as risky.

In this sense, GenAI might be understood as a form of social other rather than a tool like a calculator. Drawing on social psychological accounts of how individuals take the role of others to organise thought and action, GenAI functions as an interlocutor that supports reflection, rehearsal, and sense-making without requiring mutual recognition or obligation. This aligns with accounts of the "generalised other" as a symbolic presence that shapes thinking and self-regulation, even in the absence of a reciprocal social actor (Dodds, 1997). In this sense, interaction is socially structured, but asymmetrical. Students can address the system, articulate uncertainty, and receive a response, while remaining insulated from the interpersonal consequences that accompany human interaction.

The perceived low risk of these interactions is central. From a dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1956), GenAI occupies a deeply private backstage position in students' lives; more private than many of their close relationships. It allows students to experiment with ideas, express confusion, or articulate emotions without engaging in impression management or risking exposure to others' evaluations. Unlike interactions with peers, academics, or support staff, there is no audience to manage and no enduring social record to negotiate. This reduction in performative demand makes GenAI particularly attractive during moments of uncertainty or vulnerability, when students may be reluctant to present an unfinished or fragile version of themselves in frontstage settings.

Privacy is important. Baumeister et al. (2026) noted that early excitement surrounding email, texting, and other online interactions touted them as safe, equalising, and liberating, thus ideal for improving human relationships. However, over time it is apparent that social media participation raises new sorts of dangers, particularly regarding the fact that comments can be preserved, seen by others, and shared by others. Elite universities such as Harvard have cancelled offers of admission to students based on having posted something deemed insensitive when they were younger, thereby abruptly disgracing and derailing a promising academic career. AI partners, in

contrast, exist only for the individual communicating with them, at least until further technological advances enable some people to hack into others' private GenAI interactions.

Importantly, this does not mean that GenAI offers a substitute for human empathy or belonging (Pani et al., 2024), especially in a system attempting to build compassionate pedagogies (Killingback et al., 2025). Some evidence suggests people respond more strongly to human-authored content than to GenAI-generated content, even when unaware of the source. At the same time, transparency about GenAI authorship can increase users' willingness to engage empathetically, suggesting that emotional engagement with GenAI is possible but qualitatively different from engagement with humans (Shen et al., 2024). This distinction matters. GenAI may support emotional regulation or momentary reassurance, but it does not provide the mutual recognition, accountability, or care that characterise human relationships.

Research beyond education reinforces this ambivalence. Reviews of GenAI use in areas such as sexual health, relationship support, and companionship suggest that people are already using conversational agents for advice, reassurance, and intimacy, with generally positive short-term experiences alongside documented risks of emotional dependence and ethical concern (Döring et al., 2025). Indeed, we understand that artificial boyfriends/girlfriends are one of the biggest growth areas in AI programming, and some people report love affairs with GenAI lovers (Szczuka & Mühl, 2024). GenAI lovers are of course very non-risky: They do not break off relationships, take other lovers on the side, become hostile or abusive, or burden the humans with their own problems. They are always available and can focus entirely on the human user, given that the AI persona does not have any wants or needs of its own. While GenAI romantic attachment may seem distal from the higher education context, it has been typically lonelier people who have accessed these tools (e.g., young students: Hou et al., 2025). These findings highlight both GenAI's capacity to meet unmet needs and the dangers of overextension when such systems are treated as replacements rather than supplements to human support, particularly in cases where GenAI systems have been shown to recommend harmful actions to vulnerable users (e.g., the case of Garcia v Character Technologies, 2025).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that GenAI operates as a low-risk social other: a symbolic and responsive presence that supports thinking and emotional articulation without demanding reciprocity or mutuality. This is despite the fact that enduring human relationships are built on mutuality of care (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Its value lies in availability, predictability, and reduced social cost, rather than depth of care. Recognising GenAI in this way avoids both technological optimism and moral panic. It shifts attention away from whether students should engage with GenAI for reassurance, and towards the conditions that make such engagement appealing. The question, then, is not whether GenAI can provide care, but what its growing role as a social other reveals about where students experience gaps in support, safety, and belonging within higher education; and as we go on to discuss, the individuals making these decisions matter.

Does GenAI Fix Loneliness and Disconnection?

Loneliness is a subjective experience of social disconnection rather than a simple absence of social contact or belonging. Cacioppo and Patrick (2009) found that lonely people have as many

social interactions as other people, but the interactions are less satisfying. Loneliness is increasingly visible among higher education students. Students may be surrounded by peers, enrolled in full study loads, and digitally connected, yet still report persistent feelings of loneliness, isolation, uncertainty, and lack of belonging (Pedler et al., 2022). This disconnection is not incidental to learning. It shapes motivation, help-seeking, identity formation, and persistence, and it sits uneasily alongside institutional narratives of engagement and community. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that GenAI has entered students' lives not only as a learning tool but as a potential source of reassurance, companionship, and emotional regulation.

The emerging empirical literature presents a mixed picture. Some studies suggest that loneliness can shape how students relate to GenAI, rather than the other way around. For example, evidence indicates that loneliness may be associated with more cautious or ambivalent attitudes toward GenAI, mediated by meaning in life and moderated by academic engagement, with notable gender differences in these pathways (Cui et al., 2025). This suggests that GenAI does not simply attract lonely students as a substitute for connection but interacts with deeper psychological resources and vulnerabilities. From this perspective, GenAI appears less as a universal remedy and more as a mirror that reflects existing conditions of meaning, engagement, and support. What matters, then, is not whether students use GenAI, but what they are bringing to that interaction.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that GenAI-based chatbots can produce modest short-term improvements in mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, particularly when designed for social interaction (Zhang et al., 2025). Broader reviews of GenAI use among young people similarly identify positive effects on emotional regulation and well-being across a range of applications, while also noting the absence of robust evidence on long-term outcomes and patterns of reliance (Ng et al., 2025). These findings suggest that GenAI can offer temporary relief or scaffolding, especially when human support is scarce or delayed. However, the effects are typically small, context-dependent, and uneven, which makes it difficult to treat GenAI as anything more than an adjunct to human systems of care.

Other strands of research raise more troubling possibilities. Qualitative work with university students suggests that GenAI-mediated help-seeking may be reshaping social dynamics in ways that undermine peer interaction and collective learning. When students redirect their questions to GenAI rather than engaging with one another, opportunities for shared problem-solving, mutual support, and informal belonging can erode, leaving students feeling more isolated despite constant assistance (Hou et al., 2025). In this sense, GenAI may alleviate individual discomfort while simultaneously weakening the social infrastructures that sustain learning communities. This tension is particularly salient for higher education, where peer interaction is often assumed rather than intentionally designed. Again, what appears decisive is whether students use technological communication to enrich or to replace face-to-face relationships.

Beyond education, critical scholarship has begun to frame GenAI as a cultural technology that reshapes how intimacy, care, and connection are imagined and performed. From this perspective, conversational AI systems are not neutral supports but deliberately engineered interfaces that simulate responsiveness and empathy, capitalising on human tendencies toward anthropomorphism and emotional projection (Mishra et al., 2025). While such systems may feel comforting in the moment, they risk offering exaggerated and frictionless forms of connection that

are detached from accountability, reciprocity, and care. This critique resonates with concerns raised in cognitive and affective science, where scholars argue that text-based AI interaction cannot substitute for the embodied, synchronised, and relational processes that underpin durable human connection (Montag et al., 2025). In a sense, GenAI can provide reassurance, help students articulate feelings, and reduce barriers to seeking support, particularly in systems where human resources are stretched. On the other hand, it cannot resolve the structural, relational, and institutional conditions that give rise to loneliness in the first place. Framing GenAI as a solution risks confusing symptom relief with repair. For higher education, the more pressing question is not whether GenAI can reduce loneliness, but what its growing role in students' emotional lives reveals about gaps in belonging, care, and connection that universities have yet to meaningfully address. And, to extend, a fundamental question exists that is less about solving the structures and systems of universities but rather in the exploration of how such institutions enable the articulation of feelings of anxiety, disconnection, and safety.

Belonging, Psychological Safety, and Parasocial Support

Belonging in higher education is not simply the presence of other people, but the felt experience of being recognised, safe, and able to participate without constant self-protection. Psychological safety is the condition that makes belonging usable: it lowers the cost of asking a question, admitting confusion, and taking a risk in front of others (Newman et al., 2017). GenAI can simulate some of these conditions with striking efficiency by offering immediate responsiveness, low judgement, and a sense of control over disclosure. What students often receive in these moments is not community, but relief, and relief can feel like belonging when the alternative is silence.

The most useful lens here is parasocial support, because it clarifies how emotional connection can be experienced as real even when it is structurally one-sided. Recent work suggests that parasocial bonds with GenAI chatbots are strongly shaped by emotional validation, with adaptability, security, and humanlike cues acting as key enablers at different stages of engagement, while expertise matters less than many assume (Zhong & Luo, 2025). This matters because it explains why students may keep returning to GenAI even when the advice is imperfect or generic. They are not always chasing information; they are chasing the feeling of being met.

The psychological mechanism underneath this can be thought of as projection and looping. Conceptual work argues that emotionally vulnerable users may project relational needs onto emotionally responsive but non-conscious systems, and that repeated interaction can reinforce expectations and deepen attachment even when reciprocity is simulated rather than real (Saracini et al., 2025). In higher education, the risk is not that students are irrational for doing this, but that the system is perfectly designed to reward disclosure while never bearing the obligations that come with care. The experience can be comforting, but the relationship is asymmetrical by design.

Belonging is also a collective phenomenon that extends beyond individual interactions, and it is in this context that the ecology of "third places" becomes important. Conceptual research suggests that GenAI systems placed in shared civic environments operate as symbolic actors, with cues such as voice, accent, and behaviour read through identity-sensitive lenses, and that personalisation creates a paradox in which inclusion for some can signal exclusion or partiality to others (Paluch et al., 2025). This is directly relevant to higher education because our libraries,

learning commons, student hubs, and online platforms function as third places that sustain weak ties and ambient connections. If GenAI becomes part of that infrastructure, the central question becomes who experiences it as welcoming, who experiences it as surveillance, and who experiences it as not designed for them.

This is why a wellbeing lens is not a soft addition to GenAI debates; it is a necessary correction to overly instrumental framings. Recent dialogue-based work in post-digital education highlights the need for careful, mindful human-GenAI collaboration with guardrails that foreground human context and human capacities, including emotional and ethical judgement (Palalas et al., 2025). GenAI may support temporary psychological safety and momentary belonging, but it cannot sustain the mutuality, ongoing care, and embodied co-presence that make belonging durable. If we treat a simulated connection as a replacement for a lived connection, we will slowly trade the hard work of community for the convenience of a responsive interface.

Who Drives GenAI Use?

GenAI's role in student wellbeing is expanding rapidly, but it is not being integrated through a single coordinated plan. Adoption is uneven and often reactive, shaped by immediate pressures and individual needs rather than shared institutional strategy. Students, educators, and institutions are engaging GenAI for different purposes and with different assumptions about risk, responsibility, and benefit. That is, accountability for wellbeing outcomes becomes diffused, with no clear owner of the relational consequences that follow when support, reassurance, and guidance are increasingly mediated by automated systems.

Students Use GenAI to Plan, Offer Reassurance, and Draft Conversations

For students, GenAI is increasingly used as a low-friction support tool for emotional regulation, planning, and sense-making around both study and life decisions. Students use it to structure tasks, clarify next steps, rehearse difficult conversations, draft messages to peers or staff, and test the language they might use to express uncertainty or need (e.g., Rajki et al., 2025). In these interactions, the value is often less about perfect answers and more about having a steady conversational space to externalise thoughts, reduce overwhelm, and regain a sense of control. GenAI becomes a practical scaffold in moments where students feel cognitively overloaded or emotionally uncertain.

These uses are frequently private, situational, and invisible to institutions. They occur late at night, between classes, or during moments when students do not want the social exposure of asking a peer or the perceived formality of approaching a staff member. Because they are not captured in learning analytics or formal support pathways, universities are often unaware that students are using GenAI as a first-line support mechanism (Zhang & Tian, 2025). This invisibility matters because it allows GenAI to become an informal norm without any shared expectations, boundaries, or safeguards that would normally accompany student support practices.

For many students, GenAI serves as a supplement in situations where human support feels unavailable, unsafe, or too costly to seek. That cost may be practical, such as waiting times for services or limited staff availability, but it may also be relational, such as fear of judgement,

embarrassment, or appearing incompetent. In that context, GenAI can feel like a low-risk intermediary. The concern is not that students use GenAI for reassurance, but that the conditions prompting that turn are rarely examined, and the use becomes habitual before higher education has even named it.

Academics Use GenAI to Make Content More Accessible, Research, and Draft

For academics, GenAI is often used to improve clarity and accessibility rather than to experiment with pedagogy. Educators use GenAI to refine instructions, generate examples, translate complex ideas into simpler language, and anticipate student misconceptions (James et al., 2025). These practices are typically framed as support work: reducing friction for students, strengthening comprehension, and improving communication in environments where students often struggle with confidence or with navigating institutional expectations. GenAI becomes a tool to make teaching materials more legible and to help educators maintain responsiveness at scale, although there are equity and assurance concerns still (Dollinger & Nieminen, 2026).

At the same time, these practices are shaped by workload pressure as much as by care. Many academics are teaching larger cohorts, navigating increased student support needs, and operating in systems where time for individual interaction is constrained (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). GenAI is therefore used as a coping mechanism for the realities of contemporary academic labour, enabling educators to produce more explanatory material, respond faster, or provide more scaffolding than would otherwise be feasible. This is not a sign of indifference. It is often a sign of staff trying to maintain a human-centred teaching posture under conditions that make sustained relational work harder.

The tension is that support can quietly drift into substitution (Pani et al., 2024). If GenAI-generated explanations, feedback-like responses, or reassurance scripts become the default layer through which students experience academic care, the relational texture of teaching can thin without anyone intending it. Academics may feel they are extending support, while students may increasingly experience learning as mediated through tools rather than through shared human exchange. The dilemma is not whether educators should use GenAI, but how to prevent well-intentioned support from accelerating a shift toward a more transactional, less relational learning environment.

Institutions Are Turning to GenAI to Replace Costly Counsellors, Psychologists, and Advisors

At the institutional level, GenAI is being considered as part of the broader challenge of scaling student support systems. Demand for counselling, advising, and academic skills support has increased, while capacity and funding often remain constrained. In this context, GenAI is frequently positioned as triage, augmentation, or efficiency: an always-available front door that can provide basic guidance, direct students to resources, and handle high-volume queries (e.g., Chan, 2025 in schools). In principle, this could reduce friction for students seeking help and free human professionals to focus on complex, high-risk, or deeply personal needs.

The critical issue is that GenAI is rarely implemented as a clearly bounded layer of support with explicit governance, transparency, and accountability (Corbin et al., 2025b). Instead, deployments often emerge as pragmatic solutions to immediate pressure points, introduced quietly within digital service pathways and normalised through convenience. Institutions may not explicitly claim replacement, but in practice, the existence of a scalable GenAI layer can change what is funded, what is staffed, and what is expected of human services. Students may be directed toward automated support first, and only reach humans after the tool has determined a need or been requested to seek extra human support; although such methods seem quite nascent in the literature so far beyond basic booking systems.

The ethical risk, then, lies less in deliberate substitution than in silence and drift. Without explicit principles, institutions can slowly reconfigure care by default, treating emotional and relational support as a service-delivery problem rather than a human responsibility embedded in learning communities. If GenAI becomes the primary interface for student support, universities will need to be honest about what that does to belonging, psychological safety, and trust. This is a governance challenge, not merely a technology decision.

Where Should We Go Next with GenAI as a Social Support?

Higher education research should consider treating GenAI as part of students' relational ecosystems rather than as a standalone educational technology. This means shifting from asking whether GenAI is "good" or "bad" for wellbeing to examining how it alters the flow of help-seeking and social interaction throughout a student's day and educational experience. At the same time, research must be explicit about the limits of these tools (Corbin et al., 2025a). GenAI may provide low-risk interaction and short-term emotional regulation, but it may not be capable of teaching the embodied, reciprocal, and sometimes uncomfortable skills that underpin long-lasting relationships. If students increasingly practise their responses and thoughts about uncertainty, conflict, and decision-making with a responsive system rather than with humans, we need to understand what that does to their capacity to build mutuality, tolerate relational friction, and embed themselves within the milieu of the university. Indeed, students who move from highly supportive parents focused on them, to GenAI partners who are also highly supportive and focused on them, may be less prepared to sustain a relationship with a real person who has his or her own needs and agenda.

Institutional policy also needs to catch up with practice (Hsiao & Tang, 2025). Most higher education governance conversations about GenAI remain anchored in academic integrity, assessment, and authorship (Corbin et al., 2025b), while GenAI is already being integrated into universities' operational spine through chatbots and automated assistants for enrolments, timetabling, bookings, and student enquiries. These student interactions with GenAI shape how students experience access and responsiveness and when we consider the sometimes inequitable access to technologies, they can influence who receives support quickly and who is filtered out by design. Policy must therefore address responsibility for student support outcomes, not simply rules about acceptable academic use. Until institutions explicitly name where GenAI fits within their duty of care, student support will continue to be reshaped by convenience and efficiency rather than by deliberate educational values.

Design questions should, in turn, be treated as ethical rather than purely technical. The priority is not to build more human-like systems, but to clarify boundaries, transparency, and complementarity with human services. Students should know when they are interacting with an automated system, what it can and cannot do, what happens to their data, and how to escalate to human support when needed. GenAI can serve as a convenient front door, a navigation aid, or a low-threshold support tool, but it should not become the default substitute for human relationships or professional care. The central challenge is to design support ecosystems that extend psychological access without displacing the kinds of social capitals and social skill development that universities promise to enable. For universities in practice, this may mean more deeply considering the negative externalities that may be caused by using GenAI social support tools on social and affective development of students. Added, considering how to insulate students from the social effects of overuse of GenAI may strengthen institutional and educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Generative artificial intelligence is already functioning as a social support actor in higher education, regardless of institutional intent. Students are using it to regulate emotions, rehearse conversations, and make sense of difficult decisions, while academics and institutions increasingly deploy it to manage the support demands at scale. These examples of how GenAI is used are already well embedded in the lived experience of learning for students, and it is anticipated that students will only continue to deepen their use of GenAI in this way regardless of whether higher education chooses to acknowledge it. Ignoring this reality risks ethical blind spots and inequities in how students receive support. When GenAI support becomes informal, private, ungoverned, or even stigmatised, the students who are most likely to rely on it may be those who already experience barriers to social support, including those who feel marginalised, anxious, time-poor, or uncertain about help-seeking. Without explicit institutional responsibility, GenAI becomes a silent layer of support that shapes student wellbeing by default rather than by design.

The task ahead is not to replace human connection or support, but to understand what GenAI's growing presence reveals about its absence. If students are increasingly turning to machines for guidance, the most important question is what conditions have made that turn feel necessary. A human-centred, GenAI-enhanced higher education ecosystem will be one where GenAI improves access and scaffolds learning and wellbeing, while universities actively invest in the relational infrastructures that make belonging durable, and support equitable and accessible.

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