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Title: Human-Centred Innovation in Counsellor Education: AI Podcasts and Avatars in Regional Practice

Abstract: In regional counselling education, where relational authenticity is central and resources are constrained, integrating generative AI presents both promise and paradox. Dr Katrina Andrews, alongside Dr Amy Clarke and Mr Daniel Eaton, led two innovative L&T projects aimed at enhancing student learning while preserving the human essence of the discipline. The first initiative used NotebookLM to create AI-generated podcasts from weekly readings, offering time-saving benefits and improved accessibility—particularly for students with dyslexia. However, the synthetic voices led to reduced student satisfaction, highlighting tensions between efficiency and perceived authenticity. The second project employed HeyGen avatars for microskills assessment, allowing students to rehearse counselling techniques in a low-pressure environment. While assessment satisfaction rose, students critiqued the avatars as "robotic," revealing philosophical resistance to AI in a human-centric field. These findings underscore a critical insight: AI can support foundational skill development and accessibility, but risks eroding the relational depth valued by regional students. The projects informed a new pedagogical model—using AI for early-stage rehearsal, followed by scaffolded human interaction. This approach balances innovation with empathy, ensuring technology enhances rather than replaces the human connection at the heart of counselling education.

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