



Quiet skills, big impact

Developing clinical micro skills and communication using student-crafted AI personas

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GenAI adoption has outpaced pedagogical design

79%

of Australian students report recent GenAI use — the highest of any group (2025 Digital Inclusion Index)

57%→79%

growth in Medicine students using GenAI in research projects, 2024 to 2025

The gap: regulators (TEQSA) frame GenAI mainly as an academic-integrity issue. Less understood is whether it can be deliberately harnessed to build the deeper cognitive and interpersonal capabilities that psychology, counselling, and social work practice demand.

Skill development in health practicum education

Skills need repeated, deliberate practice

Empathy, active listening, questioning, and ethical sensitivity are learnable — but require volume of practice pre-placement and beyond.

Traditional methods don't scale

Role-play and supervision are constrained by time, staffing, cost, peer availability, and student performance anxiety.

Cohorts are diverse

Students vary in prior exposure to helping relationships, cultural orientation, and capacity for reflective self-observation.

EAL students carry a compounded load

They must build therapeutic communication skills while navigating professional language in real time.

What sets GenAI simulation apart

ACCESSIBILITY OF VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

- Fixed, scripted branching dialogue
- Step-locked question-answer exchanges
- Little persona continuity across turns
- Limited configurability of context
- Limited configurability of feedback

GENAI PERSONA SIMULATION

- Generates dialogue from real-time language probabilities
- Open-ended exchanges in the student's own words
- Multi-turn continuity — persona remembers and adapts
- Configurable around documents, culture, and complexity
- Accessible to students 24/7
- Low stakes rehearsal

Two questions guided the pilot

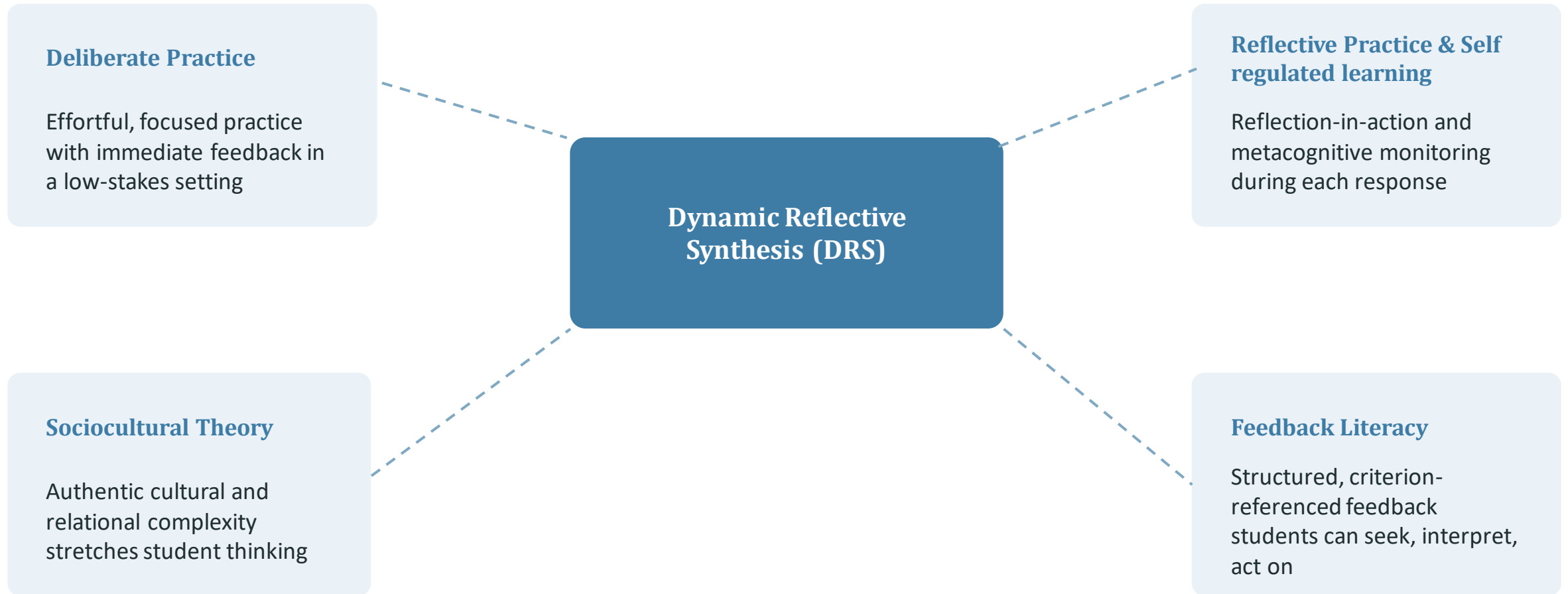
Q1

Can a co-curricular GenAI persona simulation activity support the development of micro-counselling skills, clinical reasoning, and reflective functioning in health professional students... as well as GenAI as a learning tool?

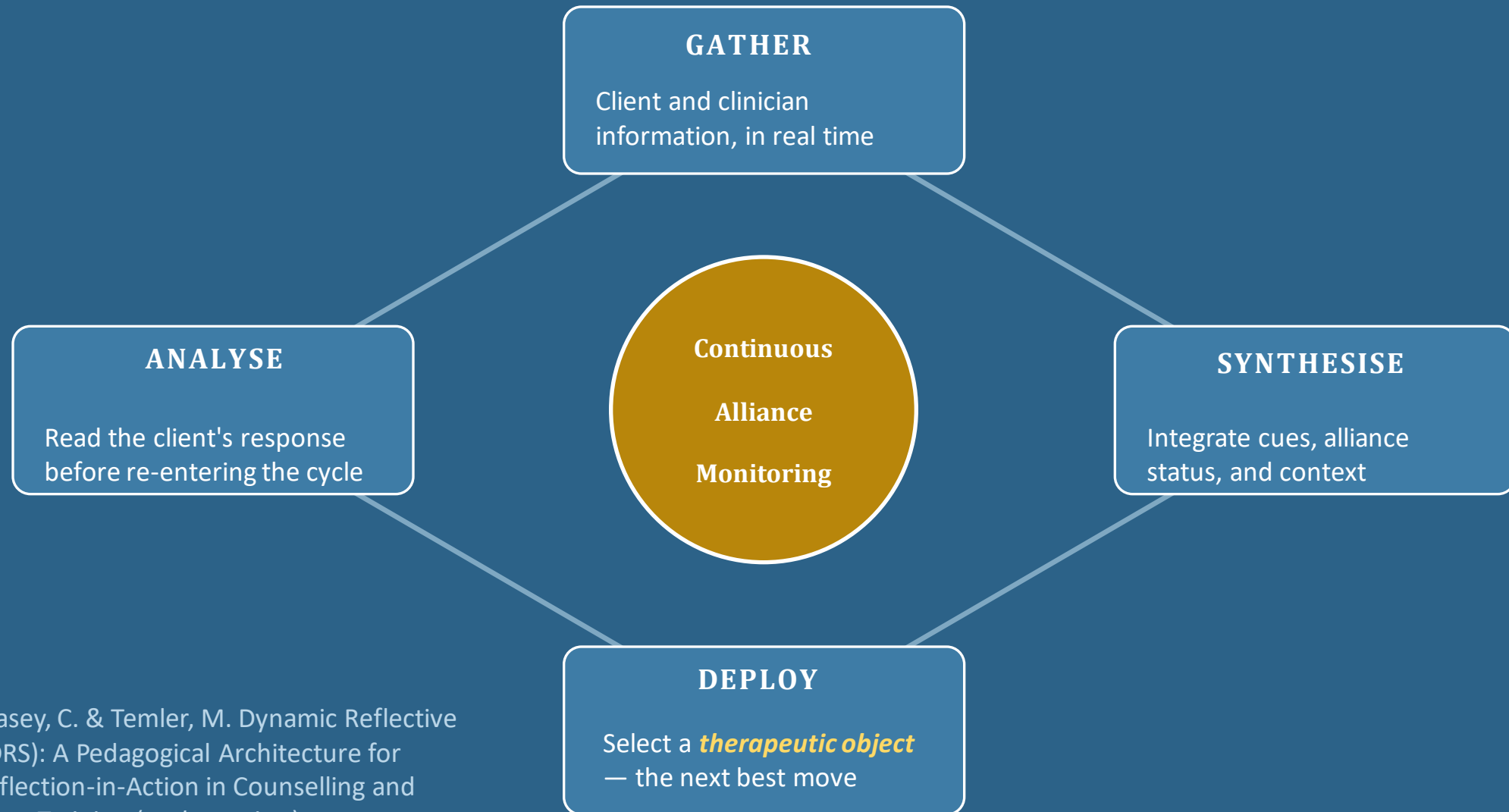
Q2

How did students experience the iterative pilot implementation of the activity, and what aspects of the design informed subsequent delivery?

Theoretical architecture of the design



Inside the DRS cycle that shaped this design



Why DRS anchors this activity's design



Gather

Foundational prep and live paired role-play give students a real-time baseline of client and clinician information before the GenAI persona begins.



Synthesise

The facilitated pause between exchanges is where students integrate the persona's cues, the alliance, and the feedback just received.



Deploy

Each typed response in the persona exchange is a ***therapeutic object*** — a deliberate clinical move students must select and justify.



Analyse

The GenAI's structured, criterion-referenced feedback plus the group debrief mirror the Analyse phase before recommencing the cycle.

METHOD

A single-site, iterative practitioner inquiry

3

Facilitated Zoom sessions
across 2025

9

Postgraduate students, Master
of Professional Psychology &
Master of Social Work

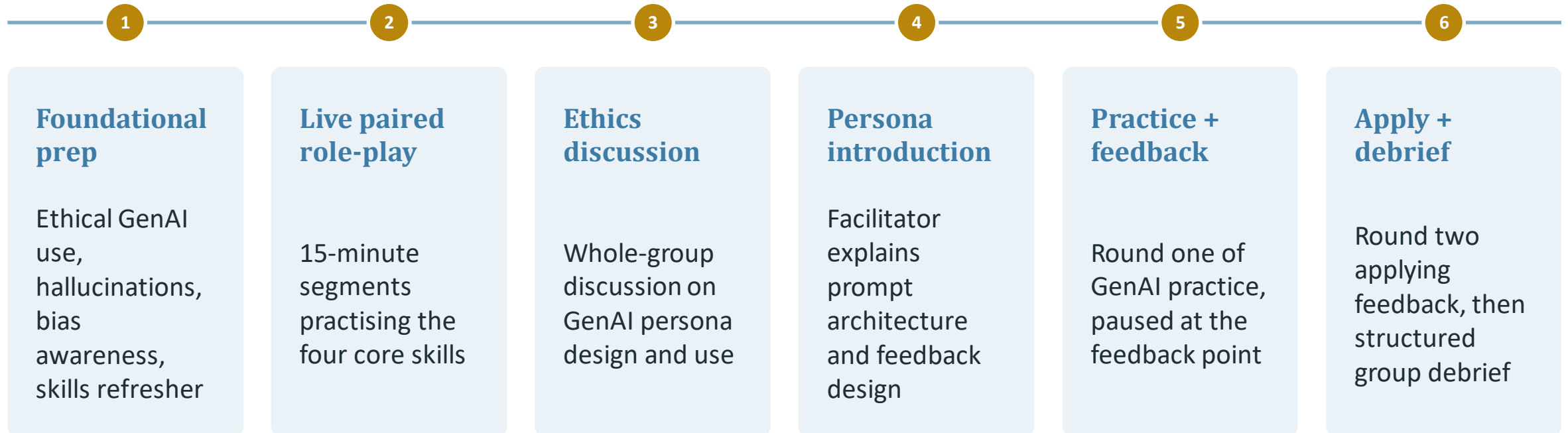
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Experienced clinician-educator
facilitated every session

Governance: Reviewed and approved as quality assurance by an authorised delegate of the Faculty of Health, SCU. Consistent with the *NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023)*, the activity did not require Human Research Ethics Committee review. Students were verbally informed of this framing at the start of each session.

Evidence base: Facilitator observations (used for iterative refinement) and voluntary student verbal feedback — treated as formative, practice-based insight, not generalisable empirical findings.

A ninety-minute facilitated workshop flow



Four principles guided the activity

01

Simplicity of access

No specialised software, subscription, or technical training — students used ChatGPT or Copilot with a provided prompt.

02

Sociocultural awareness

Personas embedded cultural, social, and family context to create authentic relational challenge, not a generic client.

03

Structured feedback architecture

GenAI evaluated responses across four skill domains with defined, criterion-referenced feedback.

04

Reflective cycling

Practice → feedback → recommence with deliberate attention — mirroring deliberate-practice principles.

Engagement and accessibility

- Setup was straightforward; interaction began quickly with minimal technical friction
- Students reported being surprised by their own emotional investment in the simulated encounter
- One student described the persona giving her vocabulary and response options that had previously felt out of reach
- EAL students highlighted the written format as enabling — time to compose, revise, and choose language precisely

“Providing vocabulary and response options that had previously felt out of reach.”

– paraphrased student reflection, facilitated debrief

Skill development and feedback literacy



A common evaluative language

Feedback organised around empathy, active listening, question quality, and ethical sensitivity mirrored the framework used in clinical supervision.



Blind spots surfaced

The GenAI identified patterns — such as a tendency toward closed or leading questions — that supervision had not previously made explicit.



A critical, not uncritical, orientation

One student questioned whether GenAI feedback truly captures what it means to be a skilled clinician.

Cultural responsiveness and sociocultural context

GENERIC PERSONA

Responses lacked emphasis on community, identity, and relational context — revealing assumptions embedded in default GenAI behaviour.

CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALISED PERSONA

Markedly more culturally sensitive responses — but students were coached to query the validity of simulated cultural features, guarding against bias and stereotyping.

Reflective functioning and deliberate practice

The enforced pause of text-based interaction made deliberation visible and unavoidable — something live clinical exchange does not allow.

Noticing a double standard

One student realised she did not expect clients to answer instantly, yet held herself to that standard in her own responses.

Time to formulate

Another linked the pause directly to skill development: time to reflect before responding supported genuine listening over reactive reply.

Thought before words

A third noted responses could be properly formulated before being committed to, rather than words arriving ahead of thought.

DISCUSSION

The prompt alone does not produce the learning

Facilitation is the mechanism

The facilitator actively scaffolded the deliberate pause — explaining in real time why slowing down was the point of the exercise, not an obstacle to it. This has direct implications for replicability: the activity cannot simply be distributed as a prompt.

Equity implications

The asynchronous, text-based format disaggregates the dual cognitive burden EAL students face. It may similarly benefit students with social anxiety, neurodivergence, or limited prior exposure to helping relationships.

LIMITATIONS

Formative insight, not generalisable evidence

Small, single-site sample

Nine students, three sessions, one Australian university, two postgraduate programs.

No comparison condition

No pre-post measurement or control group — effects cannot be isolated from facilitation or live role-play.

Self-report and dual-role bias

Voluntary verbal feedback reviewed by the same facilitator who delivered the sessions.

Platform variability

ChatGPT and Copilot behaved differently under the same structured prompt.

No non-verbal dimension

GenAI cannot capture tone, pacing, or embodied presence central to real rapport.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Sometimes, the most powerful pedagogical move is to simply ask students to slow down.

A formal research study is already in development:

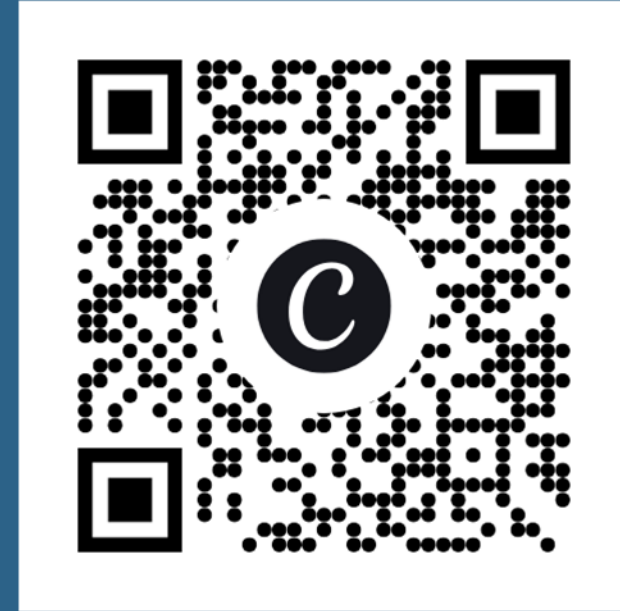
- Co-design of GenAI personas with students and lecturer-practitioners across psychology, counselling, social work, and nursing
- Integration of natural language processing for more nuanced, granular feedback
- Standardised measures of reflective functioning, micro-counselling competency, and AI literacy
- A randomised crossover design to evaluate outcomes across cohorts — ethics approval sought, grant funding secured



Thank you

Questions

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