

Counseling for International Students: Applicable Strategies for Non-anglophone Universities

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The European Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

A literature review highlights challenges in providing effective counseling for international students. Key issues include limited language proficiency, cultural mismatches between students and counselors, stigmatization of mental health, and institutional gaps in addressing the unique psychological and social needs of international students. Additionally, the lack of multilingual resources and cultural competency training for counselors exacerbates these difficulties, leaving many students unsupported in their academic and personal journeys. Drawing on lessons from worldwide literature, this study proposes practical strategies to enhance counseling services in non-Anglophone university contexts. These include culturally responsive counseling programs, integrating tailored training in cultural humility and region-specific mental health practices for counselors; peer support systems, fostering connections among international students to reduce isolation and build community; multilingual and culturally adapted resources, such as translated self-help materials and culturally relevant case studies; integrated campus-wide support networks, combining academic, administrative, and counseling services to create a holistic support system; and hybrid digital counseling platforms, leveraging technology to provide multilingual, flexible, and accessible mental health support. These strategies aim to address the structural and interpersonal barriers faced by international students, enhancing their well-being and integration. This study offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and counselors to foster inclusive, supportive, and culturally competent environments for international students in the context of non-Anglophone universities.

Keywords: cultural competency, international student counseling, multilingual mental health support, non-anglophone universities, peer support systems

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Introduction

International student mobility has significantly increased in recent decades, contributing to the cultural and academic diversity of higher education institutions worldwide (UNESCO, 2023). While international students enrich host institutions with their perspectives, they also face unique challenges, particularly in non-Anglophone university contexts, where language, culture, and systemic barriers often hinder their academic success and well-being. Counseling services are critical in addressing these challenges, yet gaps in institutional readiness and support mechanisms persist.

Despite the extensive body of research on international student mobility, existing literature has largely focused on broad trends without adequately distinguishing between the unique challenges and advantages of Anglophone and non-Anglophone universities in attracting and supporting international students. While studies have examined factors influencing student choice, such as language, tuition, and institutional reputation (Altbach, 2013; Wit, 2010), there remains a gap in comparative analyses that systematically contrast the experiences, policies, and support structures in these two contexts. There is a trend of growing adoption of English-taught programs in non-Anglophone countries (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014), but research on how these programs compare in effectiveness and appeal to those in Anglophone universities remains scarce. Similarly, studies on cultural adaptation and student well-being (Hyun et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) have primarily focused on English-speaking environments, leaving a gap in understanding how international students navigate challenges in non-Anglophone settings. The absence of such research limits the ability of non-Anglophone institutions to adopt best practices from their Anglophone counterparts while tailoring solutions to their distinct linguistic and cultural landscapes.

Previously, we examined the factors that pull international students to Japan (Tran & Jin, 2022b), the challenges they face (Tran & Jin, 2022a), the connection between the support services provided to international students and the factors that influence their choice of a particular university in Japan (Tran et al., 2022a). Additionally, we demonstrated that online stress seminars could be a potential tool for increasing the resilience of international students during the pandemic (Tran et al., 2022b).

This paper aims to bridge the literature gap by providing a structured analysis of the differences between Anglophone and non-Anglophone universities, identifying applicable practices, and proposing strategies to enhance international student experiences across diverse higher education settings, especially to the Japanese context. It will contribute to recommendations to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of counseling services in these academic environments.

Method

This study employed a literature review approach using Google search engine and Google Scholar to identify articles, websites, reports, documents published between 2000 and the present. The search focused on counseling practices for international students in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone university contexts, using keywords such as “international student counseling,” “mental health support,” “cultural competency,” and “non-Anglophone universities.” Articles were screened for relevance based on their focus on challenges, best practices, and lessons learned in counseling international students. A comparative analysis was conducted to identify distinctions and commonalities in counseling practices between

Anglophone and non-Anglophone universities. This analysis aimed to extract lessons learned from Anglophone institutions that could be adapted to non-Anglophone settings, considering the unique linguistic and cultural contexts of the latter.

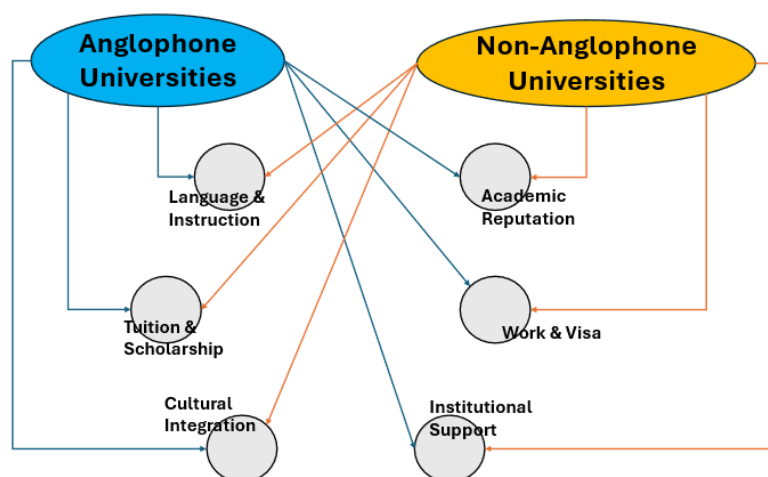
Conceptual Framework

In this study, Anglophone universities refer to higher education institutions located in countries where English is the native language, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. These universities operate entirely in English, both in academic instruction and administrative processes, making them highly accessible to international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Altbach, 2013; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). We refer to non-Anglophone universities as institutions located in countries where English is not the native language. This category includes universities in Europe (e.g., Germany, France, the Netherlands), Asia (e.g., Japan, China, South Korea), the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt), Africa (e.g., Morocco, Senegal, Ethiopia), and South America (e.g., Brazil, Argentina). While many of these institutions offer programs in English—particularly at the graduate level—the primary language of instruction, research, and administration often remains the national or regional language (Kuroda et al., 2018; Ota, 2018).

International students are a growing demographic in global higher education, but the ability to attract and support them varies significantly between Anglophone and non-Anglophone universities. These differences stem from factors such as language, academic reputation, cultural adaptation, and institutional support structures (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Anglophone Versus Non-anglophone Universities (by the authors)



Regarding language and medium of instruction, in Anglophone universities, English as the primary medium of instruction is a major pull factor. Many students from non-English-speaking countries see studying in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia as an opportunity to improve their English proficiency while earning a degree. Meanwhile, in non-Anglophone universities, while some programs are offered in English, a significant portion of courses remains in the local language, creating a barrier for international students (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). To counter this, universities in countries like Germany, Japan, and China have been expanding English-taught programs (Kuroda et al., 2018).

Regarding academic reputation and global rankings, many universities in the U.S., U.K., and Australia consistently rank high in global university rankings (QS, THE), which increases their attractiveness to international students seeking prestige (Altbach, 2013). However, non-Anglophone universities in Europe and Asia are improving in rankings, but their recognition is often region-specific. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands attract students through tuition-free or low-cost education (Wit, 2010).

In terms of tuition fees and scholarships, Anglophone universities charge higher tuition fees as a common deterrent. For instance, international students in the U.S. often pay three times the tuition of domestic students (ICEF Monitor, 2023). Scholarships exist, but they are highly competitive. Meanwhile, many European and Asian institutions offer lower tuition fees, sometimes even free education (e.g., Germany, Norway). Government-backed scholarships, such as China's CSC Scholarship and Japan's MEXT Scholarship, help offset costs (Kuroda et al., 2018).

Regarding work opportunities and post-study visas, Anglophone countries like Canada and Australia offer favorable post-study work visas, which are a major attraction. The U.K. recently reintroduced a two-year post-study work visa (Bell et al., 2024). Non-Anglophone universities in Japan and Germany also provide work opportunities for international graduates, but language barriers can limit job prospects outside academia (Kuroda et al., 2018; MyGermanUniversity, 2025).

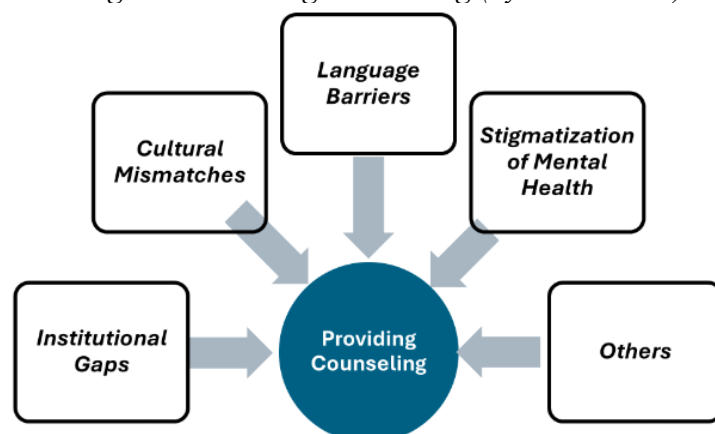
In the aspect of cultural and social integration, Anglophone universities generally have more diverse student bodies and established multicultural support services. Peer mentoring, international student associations, and mental health services are well-developed (Hyun et al., 2007). At non-Anglophone universities, international students often struggle with cultural and linguistic adaptation, and mental health support is less accessible due to stigma and resource limitations (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Regarding institutional support and counseling services, Anglophone universities seem to have more experience in handling international students, which has led to well-developed student support services, including multilingual counseling and academic support (Glass & Westmont, 2014). On the contrary, non-Anglophone universities often lack sufficient multilingual counselors and culturally responsive support structures (Sawir et al., 2007). However, initiatives like hybrid digital counseling (Elkhodr et al., 2024) are helping bridge this gap.

Key Challenges in Counseling for International Students

Figure 2 illustrates the key challenges faced by international students in counseling services, highlighting four primary obstacles: language barriers, cultural mismatches, mental health stigma, and institutional gaps. These are factors that we found to be major from literature, among other challenges, that collectively hinder students' access to effective mental health support and adaptation to university environments.

Figure 2
Challenges in Providing Counseling (by the authors)



Language Barriers

Language is a significant obstacle for international students (Kambouropoulos, 2015), impacting their ability to seek and receive counseling support (Williams et al., 2018). A lack of proficiency in the host country's language often deters students from accessing available mental health resources due to concerns about miscommunication, stigma, and misunderstanding of culturally specific expressions of distress (Sawir et al., 2007). Research indicates that international students who experience difficulty articulating their emotional and psychological struggles in a second language may be less likely to seek professional counseling (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Non-Anglophone universities often lack sufficient multilingual counseling services, limiting accessibility for students with limited proficiency in both the local language and English (Hyun et al., 2007). While some institutions provide interpreters or bilingual counselors, these resources are often inadequate, leading to frustration and reduced engagement with mental health services (Arthur, 1997). Additionally, differences in linguistic structures and cultural communication styles can affect how mental health symptoms are conveyed and understood, further complicating the counseling process (Nam & Kim, 2025). Studies have also highlighted that in many Asian and European non-Anglophone universities, international students rely more on informal peer support rather than institutional counseling services due to language barriers (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

To address these challenges, institutions must implement proactive language-inclusive strategies, such as offering multilingual digital counseling platforms, training counselors in cross-cultural communication, and providing translated self-help materials tailored to international students' linguistic backgrounds (Liu et al., 2024). Without such measures, language barriers will continue to hinder the effectiveness of counseling services and the overall well-being of international students in non-Anglophone settings.

Japan has experienced a steady increase in international student enrollment, with government initiatives such as the *Global 30 Project* and the *Top Global University Project* (MEXT, 2021) aiming to attract more foreign students (Tran & Jin, 2022b). However, language remains a major barrier to effective counseling services for these students, as the majority of university mental health support is offered primarily in Japanese (Miller et al., 2019). While some universities provide English-speaking counselors, the availability of multilingual mental health professionals is limited, making it difficult for non-Japanese-speaking students to seek help (Kanehara et al., 2015). Research suggests that international students in Japan

often experience psychological distress due to academic pressure, cultural adaptation, and social isolation, yet hesitate to seek professional help due to linguistic and cultural barriers (An, 2022). Many students report struggling to express their emotional concerns effectively in Japanese, leading to frustration and disengagement from available mental health resources. A systematic review highlighted that communication difficulties in Japanese adversely affect mental health, creating stress in daily life and challenges in describing symptoms within medical settings (Miller et al., 2019). Similarly, a study found that foreign nationals residing in Japan are less likely to seek appropriate mental health services, with the lack of medical interpreters exacerbating their mental health conditions (Takubo et al., 2020). These findings underscore the critical need for enhanced language support and culturally sensitive counseling services to improve mental health access for international students in Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese tends to emphasize indirect communication and non-verbal cues, which may not align with the expectations of students from different cultural backgrounds, resulting in misunderstandings between students and counselors (Nadiger et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, some Japanese universities have begun implementing multilingual support systems, including AI-driven chatbots, online mental health platforms, and peer-led counseling services in English and other languages. For instance, the development of AI chatbots, such as “emol,” demonstrates the potential of digital solutions in providing mental health support (Fujita et al., 2025). Additionally, efforts to train university counselors in cross-cultural psychology and improve collaboration with international student offices have been suggested as crucial steps in bridging the counseling gap (Kanehara et al., 2015). However, there is still a significant need for systemic improvements to ensure that international students in Japan have equitable access to effective and culturally competent mental health services.

Cultural Mismatches

Cultural differences between counselors and international students can lead to misunderstandings and ineffective support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Many counseling models used in higher education institutions, particularly in Western countries, are rooted in individualistic frameworks that emphasize personal autonomy, self-expression, and open discussion of emotions (Arthur, 1997). In contrast, students from collectivist cultures—such as those from many Asian, African, and Middle Eastern societies—may be more accustomed to prioritizing family expectations, social harmony, and indirect communication in their problem-solving approaches (Triandis, 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003). This misalignment can cause discomfort for international students when engaging in counseling, as they may feel that expressing personal struggles openly contradicts their cultural norms regarding privacy and emotional restraint (B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001).

A study found that Asian international students in the United States were significantly less likely to seek counseling services compared to domestic students (Mori, 2000), partly due to concerns about cultural mismatches and a perceived lack of understanding from Western-trained counselors. Many international students studying in Australia expressed dissatisfaction with counseling approaches that lacked cultural sensitivity, leading to reduced engagement with mental health services (Sawir et al., 2007). Additionally, cultural differences in the perception of mental health itself may prevent some students from seeking support. In many Asian and African cultures, mental distress is often associated with social or spiritual issues rather than psychological conditions, making Western-style counseling less relevant or even stigmatizing (Hyun et al., 2007; Wong & Hyde, 2024).

To bridge this cultural gap, universities must invest in training counselors in cultural competence, equipping them with the skills to navigate diverse value systems, communication styles, and help-seeking behaviors (Sue et al., 1998). Research suggests that the use of culturally adapted counseling frameworks—such as integrating family-based interventions or incorporating collectivist perspectives into therapy—can improve the effectiveness of mental health support for international students (Nam & Kim, 2025). Furthermore, universities can enhance peer support networks, recruit bilingual and culturally diverse counselors, and provide psychoeducational workshops that address mental health from a culturally inclusive perspective (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Without such efforts, the risk remains that cultural mismatches will continue to deter international students from seeking essential psychological support, exacerbating issues related to academic performance and personal well-being.

Stigmatization of Mental Health

Stigma surrounding mental health is prevalent in many cultures, discouraging international students from seeking help. A study found that approximately 44% of international graduate students reported experiencing an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly affected their well-being or academic performance within the past year, yet many did not seek counseling services (Hyun et al., 2007). This reluctance is often rooted in cultural beliefs that perceive seeking psychological help as a sign of weakness or failure, leading to self-stigmatization and fear of disclosure. Additionally, a lack of awareness about available counseling services exacerbates this issue. Research indicates that international students who are unaware of counseling services experience higher levels of academic stress and poorer psychological adaptation compared to those who are informed about such resources (Nina, 2009; Zeng et al., 2023). These findings highlight the critical need for universities to promote mental health awareness and destigmatize help-seeking behaviors among international student populations. These campaigns can provide accurate information about mental health conditions and available support services, fostering a more supportive environment (Withers et al., 2022). Establishing peer support networks can encourage students to share experiences and seek help without fear of judgment. Offering culturally sensitive counseling services that respect diverse backgrounds can encourage international students to utilize mental health resources. Training counselors in multicultural competencies ensures they are equipped to address the unique challenges faced by these students (N. Kim et al., 2019). Implementing regular mental health screenings and promoting self-management strategies can help in early identification and intervention of mental health issues. Providing tools and resources for self-care empowers students to take proactive steps toward their well-being (Withers et al., 2022). Moreover, online platforms that offer mental health information and virtual counseling can provide anonymity and flexibility, making it easier for students to seek help.

Institutional Gaps

Many universities lack the infrastructure and resources to adequately support international students, leading to significant institutional gaps. These deficiencies include insufficiently trained counselors, inadequate outreach programs, and the absence of culturally relevant resources (Sawir et al., 2007). A study highlighted that despite repeated calls to action, counselors often feel unprepared to support international students in the US. This lack of preparation can be attributed to limited training in multicultural competencies within counseling programs, leading to inadequate cultural competence when working with diverse student populations (Anandavalli et al., 2020). Furthermore, a recent study emphasized the

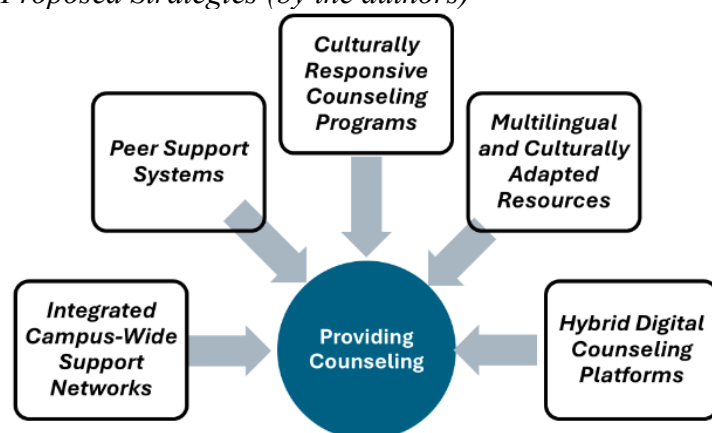
importance of mental health professionals' multicultural self-awareness and the need for diverse and culturally competent staff as key components of inclusive mental health services for international students. The findings suggest that universities should prioritize training for professionals, incorporate diverse approaches, ensure confidentiality, encourage active faculty participation, and provide suitable physical environments to enhance the quality of mental health support for international student populations (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). Research indicates that international students often remain unaware of available counseling services due to ineffective outreach efforts (Hyun et al., 2007). The lack of culturally tailored counseling services poses a barrier to effective mental health support for international students. Cultural differences in beliefs about mental health and unfamiliarity with counseling concepts can hinder international students from utilizing available services (Mori, 2000), suggesting that universities should develop resources that resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of their student populations (Kambouropoulos, 2015).

Strategies for Non-anglophone Universities

Non-Anglophone universities face distinct challenges due to resources and linguistic diversity. Best practices from Anglophone institutions, such as integrating digital counseling platforms and peer mentorship programs, can be adapted to address these gaps (Figure 3). Additionally, non-Anglophone universities, including universities in Japan must prioritize developing culturally relevant resources and training programs tailored to their specific contexts.

Figure 3

Proposed Strategies (by the authors)



Culturally Responsive Counseling Programs

Implementing culturally responsive counseling programs is aiming to effectively support their diverse student populations (Sue et al., 1998). Training counselors in cultural humility and region-specific mental health practices enhances their ability to address the unique challenges faced by international students. Cultural competence training effectively shifts attitudes, increases knowledge, and develops the skills of mental health providers, thereby improving service delivery to culturally diverse clients (Chu et al., 2022). Japanese universities are increasingly recognizing the importance of culturally responsive counseling to support their international student communities. E.g. Rikkyo University offers various support services tailored for international students, including English-speaking resident supporters and a buddy system to assist with academic and daily life (Rikkyo University, 2024). However, challenges persist in fully integrating culturally responsive counseling

practices across all institutions. Universities should prioritize training for professionals, incorporate diverse counseling methods, ensure confidentiality, encourage active faculty participation, and provide suitable physical environments to enhance the quality of mental health support for international student populations.

Peer Support Systems

Implementing peer mentorship programs can enhance the well-being and integration of international students. These programs offer guidance, foster a sense of belonging, and mitigate feelings of isolation, thereby improving mental health outcomes (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Peer mentorship programs help alleviate feelings of loneliness and alienation among international students by connecting them with experienced peers who provide support and understanding during their transition to a new academic and cultural environment (Grew, 2024). Mentors assist international students in navigating academic challenges, including understanding course requirements, developing effective study strategies, and managing time efficiently, which can lead to improved academic performance. E.g., the University of North Dakota's International Peer Mentor program is designed to assist incoming international students in adapting to a new environment and academic system (UND, 2024). Engaging in peer mentorship fosters cross-cultural communication skills and intercultural understanding, benefiting both mentors and mentees by broadening their perspectives and enhancing their ability to interact effectively in diverse environments (Grew, 2024).

Multilingual and Culturally Adapted Resources

Providing multilingual and culturally adapted resources is essential for ensuring that international students can access and relate to mental health support services effectively. Translated self-help materials and culturally relevant case studies enhance accessibility and relatability, thereby improving mental health outcomes for these students. Offering mental health resources in multiple languages ensures that international students can comprehend and utilize the information effectively, reducing language barriers that might otherwise prevent them from seeking help. Incorporating culturally relevant case studies and examples makes mental health materials more relatable to international students, fostering a deeper understanding and connection to the content. Culturally adapted mental health interventions are associated with significant improvements in depression and anxiety symptoms among young people. This suggests that tailoring resources to align with students' cultural contexts can lead to more effective mental health support (Mishu et al., 2023).

Non-Anglophone universities should prioritize the development and dissemination of multilingual and culturally adapted mental health resources. This includes translating into the languages commonly spoken by their international student population and incorporating cultural nuances into case studies. By doing so, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that acknowledges and respects the diverse backgrounds of their students, enhancing their well-being and academic success.

Integrated Campus-Wide Support Networks

Establishing integrated campus-wide support networks is crucial to effectively support international students (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). Collaboration among academic, administrative, and counseling services fosters a holistic support system that enables the proactive identification and assistance of at-risk students (Arthur, 1997). Regular interaction

among faculty, administrative staff, and counseling services ensures that concerns regarding a student's well-being are promptly addressed. This integrated approach facilitates timely interventions and support. By uniting various campus services, universities can offer a seamless support experience that addresses academic challenges, mental health concerns, and social integration issues concurrently. An integrated network allows for the monitoring of student performance and behavior across different settings, enabling the early detection of students who may be struggling and the provision of necessary support (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Japanese universities are increasingly acknowledging the importance of integrated support systems for international students. E.g. the University of Tokyo has implemented initiatives to support international students, such as providing information on daily life, academic support, and counseling services. These efforts aim to create an inclusive environment that addresses the diverse needs of international students.

Hybrid Digital Counseling Platforms

Leveraging technology through hybrid digital counseling platforms, including multilingual digital platforms and AI-driven tools, offers accessible and flexible mental health support for international students. These tools address barriers such as time constraints and stigma associated with seeking traditional in-person counseling services (Liu et al., 2024). Digital platforms enable students to access mental health resources at their convenience, accommodating varying schedules and time zones. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for international students who may face challenges in accessing on-campus services. E.g. Joy Mental Fitness offers online counseling services specifically designed to meet the diverse needs of international students, providing a flexible and accessible means of addressing their mental health concerns (Joy, 2024). AI-driven tools can provide anonymous support, allowing students to seek help without fear of judgment. This anonymity can encourage individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to engage with mental health services. Platforms like Wysa, an AI-powered personal coach, offer support for managing stress, improving sleep, and working through tough situations, thereby addressing mental health needs while mitigating stigma (Wysa, 2024). AI-driven platforms can monitor user interactions to identify signs of distress and provide timely interventions. E.g. the ChatPal chatbot offers psychoeducational content and exercises such as mindfulness and breathing, mood logging, gratitude, and thought diaries, supporting users in managing their mental health proactively (Wysa, 2024).

Non-Anglophone universities can integrate hybrid digital counseling platforms to enhance mental health support for international students. By adopting AI-driven mental health companions like Earkick, which uses real-time biomarker analysis and a multi-modal large language model companion for mental health support, universities can provide personalized and culturally sensitive support to their diverse student populations (Earkick, 2024).

Conclusion

International students face unique challenges in non-Anglophone universities that require tailored counseling approaches. This paper highlights key issues and presents evidence-based strategies to enhance counseling services. By adopting culturally responsive, technologically innovative, and integrated support systems, universities can foster inclusive environments that promote the well-being and success of international students.

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