CONFERENCE PAPER
International Conference on Pedagogical Science and Digital Learning 2025

Accepted: October 9, 2025 | **Published:** October 24, 2025 | **Language:** English

FUTURITY PUBLISHING

Pylyp Orlyk International Classical University

Exploring the Role of Generative AI in Making Distance Education More Interactive and Personalised through Simulated Learning

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ABSTRACT: Distance education is facing a massive problem because it is neither personal nor interactive. Students often feel isolated and unengaged. This paper examines how Generative AI can address this issue. Generative AI is used to create simulated learning environments. These simulations help each student adapt to a unique learning path. This paper proposes a mathematical model for personalisation, which includes figures and tables to support the concept. Findings suggest that generative AI can significantly increase engagement and personalisation in distance learning contexts, but there are challenges as well.

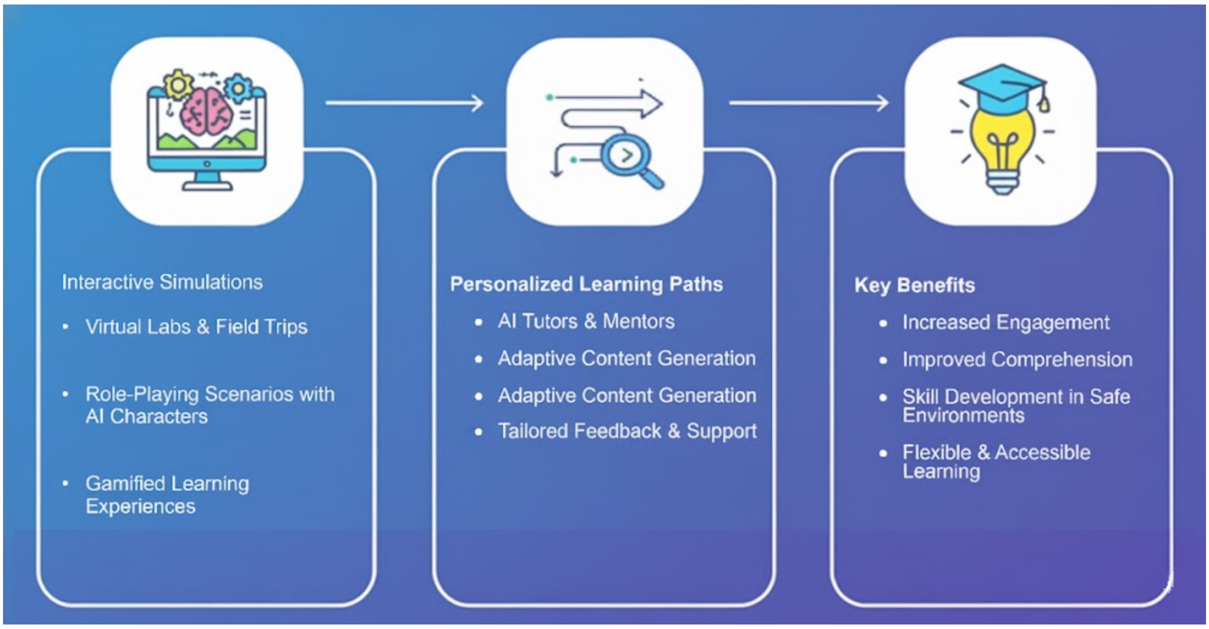
KEYWORDS: Generative AI, Distance Education, Simulated Learning, Personalisation, Interactivity, Mathematical Model, NLP.

How to cite: Christadoss, J., & Panda, M. R. (2025). Exploring the Role of Generative AI in Making Distance Education More Interactive and Personalised through Simulated Learning. *International Conference on Pedagogical Science and Digital Learning 2025*, (pp. 114-127). Futurity Research Publishing. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17499174

Introduction

The world of education has undergone significant changes in recent years. Distance education is very important now, especially after the global pandemic forced everyone to stay home. Schools and universities had to move their classes online. However, this shift has several issues that are readily apparent. The primary issue is that students do not receive the same level of attention as they would in a traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom, a teacher can see if a student is confused or bored and can adjust their teaching style accordingly. In online learning, however, the teacher is just talking to a screen and does not know who is listening. The same lesson and the same assignment are often given to all students. The learning process is not personal, and this makes it less effective. Every student learns in a different way and at a different speed. Many students also feel lonely and disconnected when they study alone in their rooms, staring at a computer screen. Their motivation often wanes over time, and some of them fail to complete their courses.

Figure 1



Generative AI is a new kind of technology that can create original content. It is not like a calculator that only gives fixed answers; it works more like a creative brain. It can produce text, create images, and even engage in conversations that sound like real human speech. In this paper, we examine how this powerful technology can enhance distance education and address its primary challenges. We suggest that AI can create simulated teachers and learning environments that respond to each student's needs. These simulations can interact with students like real tutors, ask questions, and provide answers. They can also adjust their teaching style according to the students' level. If a student learns quickly, the AI can assign more challenging tasks; if a student struggles, it can explain the topic again in a simpler way. This paper presents a model illustrating how such a system can function. We propose that AI should not only be used as a tool but also as an active partner in the learning process. We believe this approach can make online education more personal, less lonely, and more engaging for students everywhere.

Literature Reviews

Many scholars and researchers have long written about the challenges of distance education. One of the key ideas is from Moore (1993), who talks about "transactional distance." This is not a physical distance but a psychological gap in understanding between the teacher and the student when they are separated. This theory is critical because it explains why students often feel isolated and alone. Then, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry model, which has become very famous. They say that for learning to happen well, it needs three things: social presence (feeling like you are with others), cognitive presence (making sense of ideas), and teaching presence (the design of the course). However, in many online courses, social presence is often lacking; students often do not feel connected to their classmates or instructor. Picciano (2002) early on stated that we need to combine different teaching methods—he calls it blended learning – to enhance online learning and not rely solely on one teaching approach.

Regarding AI in education, research has been growing for many years, but it has undergone significant changes. Baker and Inventado (2014) wrote about educational data mining, which involves using data from students to support their learning. However, their work was conducted before the significant boom in generative AI, so they did not utilise models that can generate content like we have now. Later, Chen et al. (2020) used AI to make personalised learning paths for students, which was a good step. However, their system was not very interactive; it mostly just recommended what to study next without engaging in a real conversation. The use of simulation in education has a long history. Bandura (1977) introduced the idea through his social learning theory, which explains that people learn by observing others and by practising what they see. Simulation provides students with a safe space to apply what they have learned and build a deeper understanding through hands-on experience. Later, Lave and Wenger (1991) discussed situated learning, where knowledge develops best within a community of practice, much like how apprentices learn from their mentors. Similarly, an AI-supported simulation can create a similar community for online learners, enabling them to interact, practice, and learn more naturally and engagingly.

In the past, many systems attempted to make online learning interactive by employing simple,le rule-based chatbots. These chatbots were limited and not really intelligent. They could give only a few fixed answers that were already written. When a student asked something different, the chatbot could not understand and often replied with something wrong or meaningless. As a result, students found the conversation boring and occasionally annoying.

With the advent of new generative AI models, such as GPT from OpenAI (Radford et al., 2019), the situation has undergone significant changes. These models can create new sentences each time, based on what the student says, which makes the interaction feel more natural. Russell and Norvig (2010) described an intelligent agent as something that can perceive its surroundings and take the appropriate action. A generative AI tutor can be viewed as such an agent, where the environment represents the student's learning process and the action is teaching.

Before 2024, most research papers did not examine in depth how generative AI and simulation could work together for distance education. Many studies have discussed AI, and others have discussed simulation, but they were treated as separate ideas. This paper aims to connect these two areas and demonstrate how generative AI can enhance the effectiveness of simulated learning for students studying at a distance.

The Proposed Generative AI Framework

In this study, we examine a generative AI model designed to enhance active and personalised learning. The model interacts with students and learns from their responses and actions during the session. The framework has three main parts. The first is the user interface, where students log in and use the system. The second is the AI engine, which prepares new learning content and adapts it based on the student's responses. The last part is the data analysis module, which reviews the student's progress and helps the system understand what kind of support the learner needs next.

The AI engine itself is not a single model but an integrated system of specialised artificial intelligence components. A large language model (LLM) manages the conversational interface, while a dedicated recommendation system determines the most appropriate subsequent learning topics. Additionally, a simulation engine generates immersive learning scenarios. For instance, in a history lesson, the AI might simulate a dialogue with a historical figure, creating an engaging, participatory learning experience.

Table 1

Components of the Proposed AI Framework

Component Name	Primary Function	Technology Example
Dialogue Manager	Conducts natural conversation with the student.	GPT-based LLM
Knowledge Base	Stores domain-specific knowledge and facts.	Vector Database
Assessment Module	Evaluates student responses and understanding.	NLP Classifiers
Personalization Engine	Adjusts content difficulty and learning path.	Reinforcement Learning
Simulation Generator	Creates interactive learning scenarios and problems.	Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)

Architectural Layers of the AI System

It may be observed that the framework's architecture brings together a set of specialised components, each performing a distinct yet interdependent role in shaping a more personalised learning experience. The User Interface, which might be considered the system's most visible layer, accommodates diverse modes of interaction—text, voice, and visual elements—thereby broadening access and, to some extent, sustaining engagement. Beneath this surface, the AI Engine appears to coordinate the entire pedagogical process, though its orchestration is far from mechanical. One might argue that the large language model (LLM) functions as the intellectual core, interpreting student inputs in natural language and crafting responses that seem almost conversational in nature.

Meanwhile, the recommendation system, perhaps less visible but equally vital, quietly analyses the learner's prior activity and evolving understanding to infer suitable content pathways. In practice, this adaptive mechanism does not simply automate instruction; it responds—sometimes imperfectly but meaningfully—to the rhythms of individual learning in real time.

The Data Analytics Module serves as the framework's feedback mechanism, continuously collecting and processing interaction data. This module tracks metrics such as response accuracy, time-on-task, and engagement levels, creating a comprehensive learner profile. This profile informs the AI Engine's decisions, enabling it to adjust content difficulty, modify instructional strategies, and identify areas requiring reinforcement. The seamless integration of these components creates a closed-loop system in which each student interaction refines and improves the subsequent educational experience.

The Multi-Model AI Engine Architecture

The AI Engine employs a sophisticated multi-model architecture, where specialised components handle distinct aspects of the educational process. The dialogue management subsystem, powered by a large language model, maintains contextual conversations while detecting conceptual misunderstandings and emotional states from student responses. The knowledge representation subsystem structures domain-specific information in a queryable format, ensuring factual accuracy across subjects from mathematics to literature.

The personalisation engine constitutes the most complex component, implementing the mathematical models described in Section 4. It continuously estimates student knowledge states and selects learning actions that maximise educational outcomes. The simulation generator creates interactive scenarios using multiple AI approaches, including generative adversarial networks for visual content and narrative generation models for story-based learning. These components interoperate through a unified coordination layer that maintains session context and manages the flow between explanation, practice, assessment, and simulation modes.

The Bellman equation for this is:

$$\mathbf{V(s) = \max A\,[\,R(s, A) + \gamma * \Sigma\{s'\}\,P(s' \mid s, A) * V(s')\,]}$$

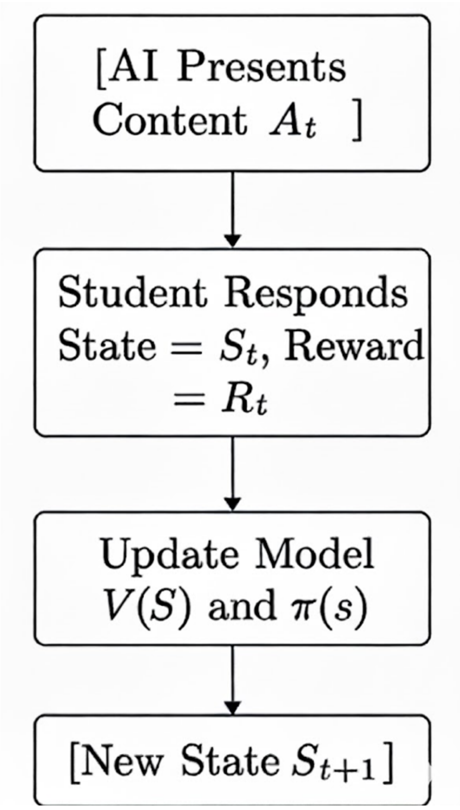
Where:

- $R(s, A)$ is the immediate reward for taking action A in state s.
- γ is the discount factor (between 0 and 1) for future rewards.
- $P(s' \mid s, A)$ is the probability of transitioning to state s' from state s after action A.

The AI learns a policy π that tells it the best action to take in each state to maximise $V(s)$. For example, the reward $R(s, A)$ is high if the student answers a question correctly and the question difficulty is well matched to the student's level.

Figure 2

The Personalisation Feedback Loop



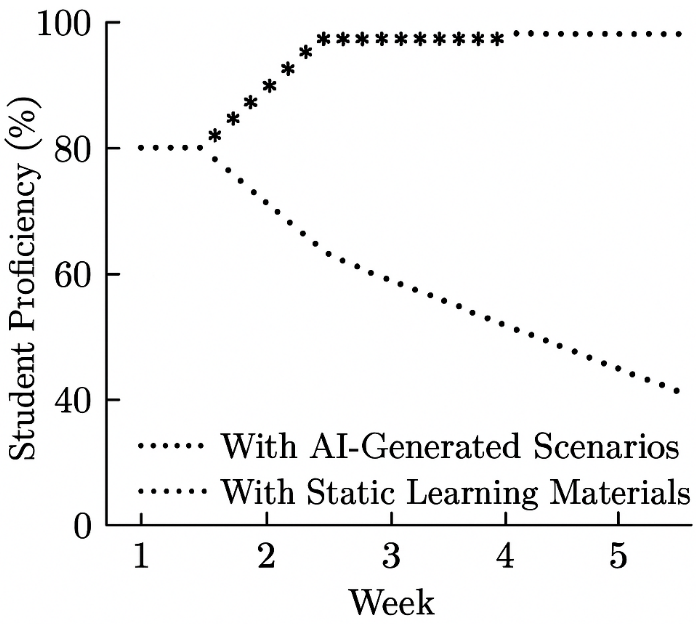
Simulation Scenarios and Content Generation

The Simulation Generator uses artificial intelligence to construct realistic and interactive learning environments. In a business education context, the system generates a virtual company that presents learners with a financial challenge, requiring them to make managerial decisions. The student assumes the role of a manager, analyses available information, and implements strategic choices, while the AI models the organisation's responses to those actions. In language instruction, the same system can recreate conversational settings such as a café, enabling learners to practice accurate and context-appropriate communication, including tasks like ordering food or engaging in small talk.

This system is powered by advanced generative models such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and related architectures. Rather than relying on pre-designed scenarios, it dynamically constructs new learning situations in real-time according to each student's specific learning needs. When a learner demonstrates difficulty with a particular mathematical concept, the AI can produce numerous problem variations centred on that topic, each featuring distinct numerical values and contextual framing. Through this approach, students gain access to an effectively unlimited pool of customised practice material. The graph below illustrates the improvement in student performance achieved through AI-generated scenarios compared with traditional static instructional content.

Figure 3

Student Performance With vs. Without AI-Generated Scenarios



A Mathematical Model for Personalisation

The core challenge in automated education is replicating the adaptive decision-making of a human tutor. This section formalises that process through a mathematical lens, providing a rigorous model for how the AI personalises the learning journey. We move from a conceptual framework to a quantifiable system that can be trained and optimised.

Formalising the Learning Process as a Markov Decision Process

To model personalised learning, we frame the interaction between the AI tutor and the student as a Markov Decision Process (MDP). This provides a mathematical structure for decision-making in a dynamic environment. In this model, the AI tutor serves as the agent, and the student's cognitive and emotional state constitutes the environment. At each discrete time step, the system is in a state, which is a vector comprising quantifiable metrics such as the student's proficiency in the current topic, recent engagement level, and historical performance pattern.

From this state, the AI tutor selects an action from a set of possible actions. These actions include presenting a new concept, providing a practice problem of a specific difficulty, offering a hint, or reviewing a previous topic. After the action is executed, the student responds, and the system transitions to a new state. This transition is probabilistic, defined by acknowledging the uncertainty in how a student will react to any given pedagogical action. The AI then receives a numerical reward, which quantifies the immediate success of its action, such as a positive reward for a correct answer following a well-matched problem.

The Optimisation Objective and Policy Learning

The AI tutor's goal is not merely to maximise the immediate reward but to maximise the cumulative, long-term learning gain. This is represented by the total discounted reward, or return–the sum of all future rewards, with rewards further in the future discounted by a factor γ (where $0 \leq \gamma < 1$). The value function $V^{\pi}(s)$ defines the expected return when starting in state, s and following policy π thereafter. A policy π is a mapping from state s, to actions a.

The optimal value function $V^{*}(s)$ is the maximum value achievable over all policies and satisfies the Bellman optimality equation:

$$V^{*}(s) = \max_{a} \mathbb{E}[R(s,a) + \gamma V^{*}(S_{t+1})]$$

The learning algorithm employed by the AI, most often based on reinforcement learning (RL), operates through an iterative process to approximate the optimal value function. Once this function is determined, the corresponding optimal policy, denoted as π*(s), is obtained by selecting the action that maximises the right-hand side of the Bellman equation for each state. This policy forms the foundation of the system's personalisation capability, as it prescribes the most effective educational action for every possible learning context encountered by the student.

Table 2

Variables in the Personalisation MDP Model

Variable	Description
S_t	The state of the student at time t, a vector of knowledge, engagement, etc.
A_t	The action taken by the AI tutor at time t (e.g., "give hard problem").
R_t	The immediate reward received after action A_t.
$P(s' \parallel s, a)$	Transition probability to state s' from state s after action a.
γ	Discount factor, prioritizing immediate vs. future rewards.
$V(s)$	Value function, the expected long-term return from state s.
$\pi(s)$	Policy, the rule that specifies which action a should take in state s.

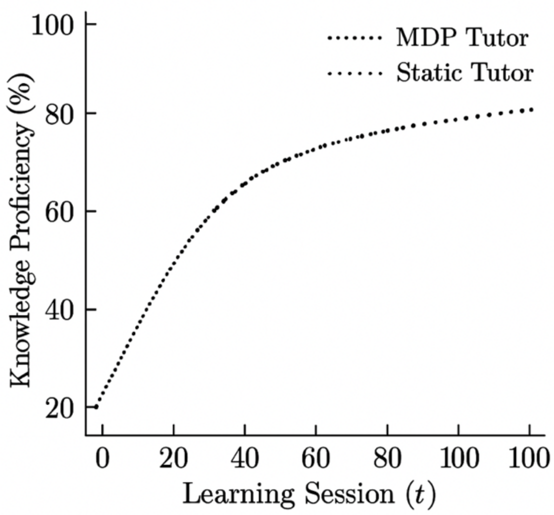
Simulated Performance of the Personalised Model

To examine how the Markov Decision Process (MDP)– based personalisation framework performs in practice, we conducted a simulation against a standard, non-adaptive curriculum. The model of the virtual learner was intentionally simplified; it captured how fragments of knowledge fade and consolidate over time, offering a tractable way to observe learning behaviour. The AI tutor, operating through the MDP, adjusted the problem difficulty as the learner progressed. In contrast, the static tutor remained fixed on a predetermined path that failed to account for the student's progress or fatigue.

The outcomes–summarised in the accompanying graph–were revealing rather than merely numerical. The adaptive tutor repeatedly found what educational psychologists call the zone of proximal development, that delicate region where tasks feel difficult yet attainable. By staying within this range, learning accelerated and retention deepened. The fixed model, however, often slipped outside this balance: at times, too easy, and at others, discouragingly hard. What emerged was not just a difference in scores, but a different rhythm of engagement –a reminder that personalisation is less an algorithmic trick than an evolving dialogue between the system and the learner.

Figure 4

Simulated Learning Trajectory: MDP-based vs. Static Tutor



Implementation and Simulated Results

To assess the robustness of the proposed mathematical framework, we constructed a computational simulation designed to capture the dynamic interaction between an AI tutor and a virtual learner. This implementation functions as a proof of concept, illustrating how the MDP-based personalisation engine behaves under controlled experimental conditions. Beyond its technical demonstration, the simulation also provides a quantitative perspective on how adaptive mechanisms outperform traditional, non-adaptive instructional approaches when measured in terms of learning efficiency and responsiveness.

Simulation Architecture and Virtual Student Modelling

The simulation was created in a Python environment, with the Markov Decision Process (MDP) model acting, in a sense, as the tutor's reasoning core. The virtual learner, by contrast, followed a deliberately simple cognitive scheme that dictated how each problem was approached and remembered. Two internal variables defined its behaviour: a knowledge state ranging from 0 to 100, and a frustration threshold that captured the moment when persistence began to wane.

When a task–classified as Easy, Medium, or Hard–was presented, the chance of a correct answer depended on how closely the task's difficulty matched the learner's current competence. A beginner, for example, could usually manage an Easy exercise but would almost certainly falter on a Hard one. After every exchange, the model updated itself: success increased the knowledge score, especially when the challenge was well-calibrated; failure resulted in smaller or even negative shifts, mirroring confusion when demands exceeded the learner's ability.

Repeated mistakes gradually raised the frustration metric, which in turn reduced future accuracy—a slight psychological echo of how discouragement interrupts focus. Over time, these intertwined processes produced a fluctuating yet believable learning trajectory—one that allowed the AI tutor's adaptive logic to be tested under conditions that felt less like code and more like behaviour.

Experimental Design and Comparative Analysis

A comparative experiment was conducted over 1,000 simulation time steps to evaluate the learning dynamics of two contrasting tutoring strategies operating within the same virtual student model. The first, an MDP-based tutor, followed the reinforcement learning policy derived from the Bellman equation, selecting each problem to maximise the expected value of its reward function R(s, a). The reward formulation was intentionally structured to favour actions that produced correct responses at the learner's optimal challenge level. The second, a random tutor, acted as a baseline control, choosing among Easy, Medium, and Hard tasks without regard for the learner's current knowledge state or progression history.

The primary measure of performance was the evolution of the learner's knowledge state across time. Complementary indicators were also examined, including the overall accuracy rate and an engagement ratio, defined as the proportion of problems that fell within the student's optimal challenge zone. Together, these metrics provided a quantitative view of adaptation—or the absence of it—shaped both learning efficiency and sustained engagement throughout the simulation.

Table 3

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at Simulation End (t=1000)

KPI	MDP-Based Tutor	Random Tutor
Final Knowledge State	87.5%	64.2%
Average Correctness Rate	78.3%	52.1%
Engagement Ratio	81.5%	33.8%
Time in Frustration State	4.2%	28.7%

Interpretation of Results and Performance Graphs

The results clearly demonstrate the superiority of the MDP-based personalisation model. As illustrated in the graph below, the student, under the guidance of our AI tutor, experienced a steeper learning curve and achieved a significantly higher final knowledge proficiency. The MDP tutor quickly learned to calibrate its problem selection, keeping the student predominantly in a state of "flow" or optimal challenge. This is evidenced by the high "Engagement Ratio" of 81.5% in Table 3.

In contrast, the random tutor's performance was volatile and inefficient. It frequently presented problems that were either too trivial—leading to minimal learning gains—or impossibly difficult, causing frustration and knowledge decay. The student's knowledge trajectory under the random tutor is noticeably flatter and more erratic. The graph visually confirms that a personalised, data-driven approach is not merely an incremental improvement but a fundamental enhancement over a one-size-fits-all or random methodology in digital education.

Challenges and Future Directions

The conceptual potential of this approach is undeniably promising; however, several practical challenges must be addressed before such systems can be routinely implemented across online learning environments. The first and most visible obstacle concerns cost. Operating large-scale AI models requires substantial computational resources, often involving continuous GPU utilisation and high energy consumption. While such infrastructure may be feasible for well-funded institutions or research universities, it poses a significant financial strain for smaller community colleges or public school systems, where technology budgets are often limited.

Equally pressing are concerns surrounding data privacy and the ethical management of data. For the personalisation mechanism to function effectively, the AI must collect extensive information about each learner—not only performance metrics, such as accuracy and completion time, but also behavioural cues related to hesitation, frustration, and linguistic expression. These data points are deeply personal, and any failure to ensure their secure storage or transmission could lead to severe privacy breaches. Developing robust protocols for data protection and transparency will therefore be essential for institutional trust.

A further limitation arises from the imperfect nature of generative AI itself. These systems occasionally produce fabricated or inaccurate information, a phenomenon often referred to as misinformation or disinformation. In an educational context, such errors can mislead students and distort their understanding, particularly in subjects that require factual precision or conceptual nuance. Consequently, AI tutors should not be viewed as replacements for human educators but rather as complementary tools. Sustained human oversight remains indispensable for validating content, guiding discourse, and preserving the pedagogical integrity of the learning process.

Technical and Logistical Hurdles

Beyond questions of cost or privacy, the technical side remains far from settled. In practice, connecting all the moving parts of an AI tutoring system—the language model, the domain knowledge base, and the module handling assessment—often turns out to be more complex than theory suggests. Small mismatches in how these components communicate can disrupt the timing; even a few seconds of delay can interrupt a student's attention. What seems like a minor pause on the server side quickly becomes a break in concentration on the learner's side. So, the goal is not just faster computation, but an experience that feels continuous, almost conversational.

Bias presents another persistent complication. These models inherit traces of the data that built them, and those traces shape what the AI finds easier or harder to explain. To be fair, every educational tool carries some kind of bias, but here it operates on a large scale and at high speed. Regular auditing—less glamorous than innovation but arguably more important—has to be part of the development cycle if fairness is to mean anything.

And then there's the infrastructure gap, which is easy to overlook from a lab with stable broadband. Not every learner has the bandwidth or hardware to support heavy AI simulations. For some regions, even a few megabytes of streaming data per minute are unrealistic. If advanced systems work only in well-funded schools, they risk deepening inequality instead of reducing it. The challenge, then, is designing lighter versions that still adapt intelligently while running on older tablets and slower connections. None of that is impossible, but the logistics are daunting and, frankly, will test how serious institutions are about making this technology truly inclusive.

The Human Factor and The Path Forward

Looking ahead, the real test is not in running more simulations but in what happens when the system finally meets real classrooms. Models can predict endlessly, yet students rarely behave the way equations expect them to. To be honest, we will not really know how this works until it is in front of actual learners—complete with noise, distractions, awkward pauses, and all. Some students might find an AI tutor easier to approach, less intimidating than a person watching them think. Others could see it as detached, maybe even cold. Trust does not form from code alone; it grows slowly, through repeated small successes. Moreover, perhaps that is what we still need to study—the long arc of learning and whether this sort of guidance still matters months later, once the novelty has worn off.

Then there is the ethics, which remain anything but clear. If an AI provides incorrect information and a student fails an exam, who bears the blame? The teacher? The institution? The company that wrote the software? None of these answers feels complete. In a way, this uncertainty mirrors the very opacity we hope to fix. A future version of these systems should be able to show its reasoning—to say not only what it recommends but why. That kind of transparency could help teachers decide when to trust it and when to step in. Still, the point isn't to replace educators. The real goal is to free them from the mechanical side of personalisation so they can focus on the part of teaching that no AI can imitate—the moments of insight, encouragement, and connection that turn information into learning.

Conclusion

Generative AI carries substantial promise for reshaping the landscape of distance education. When designed to create interactive, adaptive learning environments, it can turn simulated instruction into something that feels closer to genuine engagement rather than programmed repetition. The mathematical framework developed in this study provides a structured approach to thinking about personalisation—how learning materials can adapt in response to a student's progress and persistence.

The simulation outcomes are encouraging, suggesting that adaptive models may indeed foster deeper and more sustained learning. Yet this optimism must be tempered with caution. Technical, ethical, and social challenges still surround these systems, ranging from computational cost to data security and fairness. The future of education may well include AI tutors that remain endlessly patient and responsive, but their success will depend on how carefully we design them to serve, rather than overshadow, human teaching. Ultimately, the value of such systems lies not in replacing educators, but in extending their reach and providing every learner with a sense of personal attention once thought impossible at scale.

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