

## “ChatGPT is my friend” – From solitude to university community with *cura personalis*

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Botanical Garden of the University of Sopron (Gergő Bogáti, 2025).

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### ABSTRACT

The article follows the story of a first-year student who arrives at university feeling isolated but gradually becomes part of a supportive academic community. It introduces the '*cura personalis*' approach at the University of Sopron—an attitude that defines the university years as a qualitative period, where personal care and attention are considered fundamental elements of academic life.

Readers gain insight into the value-based mental health work of the Student Support Service, where unconditional acceptance meets unconditional love, the activities of the volunteer Peer Helper group, and the inclusive spirit of the Open Intellectual Workshop.

The personal story at the end of the article offers a touching and inspiring example that faithfully reflects the defining role of the *cura personalis* attitude in academic life.

The stories discussed in the article were used with the full consent of the students.

**Keywords:** *Cura personalis*, student well-being, peer support, value-based mental health, three-level well-being model

## Introduction

“My reward is that I may do it.” (Református Szeretetszolgálat, 2025). This old deaconess motto aptly expresses the vocation we all share as professionals in higher education, privileged to support students in their integration into academic life. Supporting students is not merely an administrative or instructional responsibility, but a complex pedagogical, mental-health, and community-building endeavor that nurtures both individual development and collective well-being. At the University of Sopron, our aim is for the university to become a place where students may discover the inexhaustible source of their professional vocation and personal happiness.

For this reason, alongside scientific training, the meaningful realization of pedagogical presence and the promotion of student well-being must also assume a central role. Within higher education institutions, academic success and personal development are closely intertwined with mental, emotional, and relational resources. Guided by this recognition, the University of Sopron treats student well-being as a strategic priority, grounded in personal care, community connectedness, and a value-based mental-health approach (Stummerné Nagy, 2026).

## *Cura personalis* and the value-based mental health approach

As a Reformed pastor and mental-health professional, and in my role as head of the Student Support Service at the University of Sopron, it holds particular significance for me that our institution works for student well-being in the spirit of *cura personalis* (Soproni Egyetem, 2025). This approach permeates the quality of education and exerts a meaningful influence on students’ academic progress.

*Cura personalis*, as part of the Jesuit intellectual heritage, in its original spiritual meaning denotes care directed toward the person—care that seeks to nurture inner freedom and foster spiritual growth, “both a characteristic of spiritual accompaniment and an integral element of Jesuit education” (Kolvenbach, 2007, p.10). In this context, personal care aims to support the individual’s inner development, enabling them to respond responsibly and freely to God’s calling.

The University of Sopron respectfully carries forward this interpretation of *cura personalis*, elevating it to a universal level and applying it within the academic environment, independent of students’ religious or worldview affiliations — I would add — ultimately contributing to the transmission of Christ-centered values to all people. The institution seeks to ensure that universal human values are realized through personal care. This approach integrates a value-based mental health perspective, supporting students’ spiritual, intellectual, and social development along shared human and ethical norms.

At the intersection of spiritual and humanistic perspectives stand human dignity, unconditional acceptance, and unconditional love. This vision complements Carl Rogers’ concept of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1962), extending it beyond his interpretation of *agape* as “a kind of love” (Rogers, 1962), toward a more encompassing understanding of *agape*—divine love as an all-embracing, unconditional care.

This attitude forms the foundation of student support, where personal attentiveness and relational security hold a central and sustaining role.

### Student Support Service and well-being programs

The primary activities of the Student Support Service include organizing and coordinating programs that promote student well-being and learning, as well as providing individual mental-health, psychological, and pastoral care. It is particularly important that first-year students become aware of these services from the very beginning of their studies.

The first step toward connection is getting to know one another, for “knowledge itself signifies belonging” (Stummerné Nagy as cited by University of Sopron, 2026).

This became evident in the experience of one of our students, who once visited me and shared that on the campus of the “Green University” (University of Sopron, 2025), home to more than 4,000 students, he often sat alone on a bench in the 101-year-old Botanical Garden, shining as a “garden of living knowledge” (University of Sopron, n.d.). There, he spent time on his phone, conversing with an artificial intelligence, and quietly remarked: “ChatGPT is my friend.”

By attending carefully to the essence of his words, we arrived at a deeper understanding: loneliness may exist as a prelude to community. Sitting beside him on that unseen bench, within the upward-reaching garden of trust, the certainty of support gradually revealed itself. Within this space of attentive presence, the *cura personalis* approach gently reduced the student’s reliance on AI-mediated companionship.

This story illuminates the phenomenon of contemporary loneliness within higher education, to which personal attentiveness and community support may offer a meaningful response. Through careful listening and personal care, loneliness can be transformed into relational connectedness. Like the sprouting of a sown seed, one could almost hear the soul once labeled introverted begin to sprout as they listened with heartfelt attention to the invitation to the Open Intellectual Workshop.

Within this program organized by peer supporters, the student found a supportive community where reflective dialogue and mutual acceptance created opportunities for personal growth, while student well-being is further strengthened by numerous additional initiatives, such as stress-management workshops, the MetaTan learning-support club, and Well-being Days. For international students, the StudentHelp service and the Connecting Minds groups provide additional support, facilitating integration and relational connectedness. As a result of these efforts, when the University Mental Health Award of the Year was introduced in Hungary in 2026, the University of Sopron was among the first institutions to receive a nomination (University of Sopron, n.d.), reaffirming the university’s commitment to the development of student well-being.

### Mentoring system and community building

The privilege of community building lies in one person placing another at the center of their attentive care, and in recognizing and drawing forth the values and talents that reside within each individual. This perspective forms the foundation of personal pedagogy, in which students appear not merely as learners, but as individuals shaped by unique life paths. Guided by this approach, the University of Sopron has developed a student support system that simultaneously strengthens academic progress and fosters meaningful community connection.

First-year students are supported in their integration by senior students and faculty mentors. The aim of the mentoring program is to provide students with secure points of connection from the very beginning of their academic journey, offering personal guidance as they adapt to university life. Within the Tutor Program, trained student tutors provide assistance in academically challenging subjects, thereby promoting academic success and reducing the risk of dropout.

The University of Sopron’s distinctive Selmec student traditions, dating back to 1735, form part of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (Szellemi Kulturális Örökség Magyarországon, 2014). Rooted in these traditions, senior students support newcomers from their very first days (University of Sopron, 2025). This attentive welcome and personal guidance nurture trust among students and strengthens the sense of belonging that is essential for both academic and personal flourishing.

A few years ago, the dedicated Peer Support Group was also established, and in 2026 the International Peer Support Group was also formed (University of Sopron, n.d.). Its members are committed students who participate in training supported by psychologists and equality coordinators. Through meaningful and deep conversations, peer supporters assist fellow students in navigating challenges, while also bridging the gap between students and professional services. In addition, they organize community programs, mental health challenges, and motivational lectures that deepen interpersonal connections and strengthen community cohesion.

### Three-level well-being model and institutional support

In the spirit of *cura personalis*, the University of Sopron places special emphasis on supporting student well-being through a three-level mental health model encompassing individual, community, and organizational dimensions.

At the individual level, low-threshold pastoral care, mental health and psychological counseling, crisis prevention, and stress management programs are available to both domestic and international students.

At the community level, the development of resilience and relational resources takes center stage. Psychoeducational and reflective groups, programs organized by the Student Support Service, peer-support initiatives, and community workshops foster identity development, self-reflection, and academic engagement. Among these are the Open Intellectual Workshops (University of Sopron, 2025), where small groups of 10–15 participants are united by a shared purpose: strengthening student well-being. Such spaces can gently dissolve anxieties that hinder self-confidence, offering a genuine remedy for loneliness and isolation. As the student mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the rediscovery of community may transform not only relationships, but also the ways in which technology itself is used—guided by ethical awareness and human connection.

At the organizational level, the goal is to cultivate an institutional culture that supports well-being. The mental health-oriented preparation of mentor and tutor programs, together with the integration of learning processes and mental health, contributes to students’ long-term development.

The Student Support Service further enhances this framework through a signaling system developed in cooperation with university and faculty *cura personalis* groups, enabling early recognition of emerging challenges. Faculty-level groups—comprising instructors, student representatives, and academic staff—remain directly accessible to students, allowing support to be timely, personal, and responsive.

## Conclusion

In summary, our aim is for the university to become “a home where everyone may find themselves, a place where their life may unfold and flourish” (Stummerné Nagy as cited by University of Sopron, 2024).

Finally, I would also like to express my gratitude for the dedicated and professional work of our psychologist colleagues and for the collaboration of all our professional partners. It is well known that in psychological practice, positive relational factors—such as unconditional regard, empathy, and supportive presence—are fundamental to the success of the helping process (Rogers, 1957). Yet at times, the helping profession reveals its blessings in unexpected ways.

Once, a student visited the Student Support Service due to mental-health difficulties. Early in our conversations, I suggested the possibility of consulting an external psychologist, recognizing its importance. The student duly attended five sessions with the psychologist and then again requested an individual consultation at the Service.

Suddenly, I did not know how to make sense of this, and when the student arrived, I cautiously asked how she had felt with the psychologist, to which she replied with infinite respect:

“It was good, very good with the psychologist, but you... you love us.”

So, it is with all of us who, in the field of student well-being, lovingly guide those entrusted to our care through the sheltered, green-leafed paths toward the bright, arcaded ways of academic life.

## Biography

Ágnes Stummerné Nagy is the coordinator and professional leader of the Student Support Service at the University of Sopron. She is a Reformed pastor, a mental health prevention specialist, and holds qualifications in human resources management as well as a social work professional exam. She also serves as a part-time lecturer at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, where she currently teaches basic diaconal studies. Previously, her subjects were pastoral care and the psychology of religion.

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