

# Digital Education, Mental Resilience and Emotional Well-being of the Students of HEIs: Addressing Mental Health in the Light of NEP 2020

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## Abstract

The present paper probes the interplay between digital education, students' mental resilience, and their emotional well-being within the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In particular, the paper places a focal point on addressing mental health issues among students and assesses the impact of the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 in creating an educational atmosphere and environment facilitative to the cognitive growth and well-being of students. It is evident that the widespread circulation of technology among students of HEIs has detrimental effects on their mental resilience and emotional well-being. Excessive digital screen time leads to deteriorated mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, compulsive behaviours etc., intensified by nomophobia (no mobile phobia). Again, information overload in the digital age hampers decision-making ability and deepens anxiety among students. The deleterious effects of cyberbullying and phubbing on social skills, well-being, interaction and relationships capture the essence for educators, researchers and policymakers to address these concerns without much delay. Nevertheless, NEP 2020 already prioritizes both academic excellence and the mental health of students of HEIs through facilitating counselling services, a flexible curriculum, diverse extracurricular activities etc. The policy aims to reduce anxiety and stress by shifting away focus from rote memorization, high-stakes assessments and a rigid academic atmosphere while cultivating a vibrant campus life. It also recognizes the unique needs of vulnerable student populations, emphasizing targeted support for their academic success and mental well-being. While NEP 2020 acknowledges these concerns, it may fall short of fully addressing these complex mental health challenges, necessitating a more adaptable, holistic approach.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Digital Education, Mental Health, NEP 2020, Stress, Technology

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary educational scenario, marked by its profound shift due to the emergence of the digital era, has fundamentally altered the means through which students access and engage with information, knowledge and wisdom. The pervasive integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into the educational field has not only expanded the horizons of learning but has also afforded students unprecedented connectivity and unrestricted access to an expansive reservoir of

knowledge. In the second decade of the 21st century, digital transformation has become a vital priority for higher education institutions, a natural and essential step for organizations aiming to lead change and excel in their individual fields (Benavides et al., 2020). Internet and broadband connectivity always hold immense potential to reduce educational disparities by facilitating innovative approaches to reach learners, including marginalized and special needs groups, and enhancing access to information and educational resources, equipping them for success in the digital age (UNESCO, 2020). The emancipatory and transformative potential of ICT in higher education in India has facilitated the expansion of higher education through part-time and distance-learning programs, effectively addressing issues such as cost constraints, limited teaching resources, educational quality concerns, and overcoming geographical and temporal barriers (Pegu, 2014). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 remains one to ascribe prominent and pronounced emphasis on digital and digitalization of services, ultimately exemplifying a paradigm shift that admits the pivotal role played by technology in providing equitable access to quality educational services to students, especially of the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), transcending any possible constraints.

Nevertheless, this transformative paradigm shift, packed with its countless favours and benefits, has ultimately brought forth a confluence of hurdles and challenges. The chief among them remains the concern about the degradation of mental resilience and emotional well-being of students. Mental resilience encompasses the capacity to rebound from adversity and maintain psychological stability, while emotional well-being signifies balanced emotional responses and effective emotion regulation, contributing to overall psychological health. The growing dependence on digital technology has raised worries among parents, educators, governments, and youth about its potential to worsen anxiety, stress and depression, disrupt sleep, breed cyberbullying, and distorted body image (OECD, 2019). Connectivity, accessibility, and information overload have the potential to contribute to a range of mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Scott et al., 2016). Again, the nature of the technology employed is a determinant of the cognitive impact, however, almost all technologies induce fleeting changes in mood and permanent changes in brain function and behaviour (Halupa, 2016).

The comprehensive 66-page policy document of NEP 2020 released by the Indian government on July 29, 2020, is truly remarkable in its extensive coverage, addressing various dimensions of education (Govinda, 2020). Although the NEP 2020 primarily addresses the paradigms of education, its profound repercussions reverberate across various domains. One such domain of profound value is the potential influence of this policy on mental health. As India wrestles with a growing mental health crisis due to digitalization in particular, NEP 2020 can act as a stimulus for addressing the interaction between education and the mental well-being of students. The policy prioritizes the holistic development of students, especially the development in the affective domain of their minds, and encourages visionary measures to address mental health and well-being concerns (NCERT, 2022).

In this setting, the present paper delves into a required study of the impact of digital technology on mental resilience and emotional well-being among pupils, followed by a humble analysis of the NEP 2020 and its implications in this context. Through this paper, the study hopes to contribute to the ongoing discourse on mental health and the digitalization of education, promoting the development of strategies and interventions that exalt the well-being of students of HEIs in the ever-evolving digital domain.

## 2. Objectives

The paper delves into the following objectives:

- To examine the impact of digital education on the mental resilience and emotional well-being of higher education institution (HEI) students, considering factors such as screen time, information overload, nomophobia etc.
- To evaluate the prevalence and consequences of mental health challenges among HEI students, including anxiety, depression, and obsessive behaviours, in the context of their engagement with digital technologies.
- To explore the specific provisions related to mental health within the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and assess their effectiveness in addressing the mental health concerns of HEI students in the current scenario.
- To contribute to the ongoing discussion and debate surrounding the intricate interplay between the digitalization of education and the state of mental health conditions of the learners.

### 3. Integration of Technology into Education

India has made substantial progress in embracing digitalization through initiatives like Digital India and the rapid growth of the technology sector in recent years (Kamble, 2023). For India, a nation distinguished by its vast geographical vastness, diverse demographics, and ever-increasing educational needs, the incorporation and integration of digital education honours an essential landmark in its educational revolution over the period. The nation is home to a youthful population with a genuine appetite for knowledge and wisdom. In recent years, digital education in India has rapidly evolved, revolutionizing how students acquire knowledge in schools and colleges and gradually replacing traditional chalk-and-talk approaches with interactive teaching methods through the widespread adoption of digital solutions (Gond & Gupta, 2017). The digitalization of education also initiates a paradigm shift in pedagogical methods. It creates an interactive and dynamic learning environment where students can engage with content enriched with multimedia elements. The amalgamation of technology with pedagogy can render learning more engaging, experiential, and centred around the needs of individual students. Utilizing learning tools and technology fosters self-directed learning skills, enhancing students' ability to identify, access, apply, and assess online resources, ultimately boosting efficiency, productivity, and critical thinking development, aligning with the broader objectives of 21st-century education (Rastogi, 2019).

To meet the needs and demands of the student population, the government has embarked on a superabundance of diverse initiatives purposefully crafted and executed by governmental and non-governmental authorities. The Indian government indeed is aspiring to digitalize school education by providing digital infrastructure, including digital boards, and classrooms, and implementing initiatives like the one-laptop-per-child project and machine learning artificial intelligence, thereby fostering a competitive spirit in the quest of embracing digital technologies (Singh, 2019). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), signifying an emblem of the democratization of education, emerged in India as educational platforms, marked by scalability, accessibility, inclusivity and the prospect of revolutionizing traditional modes of knowledge dissemination. The growing interest of students in India in global MOOC providers like Coursera, edX, and Udacity highlights the latent potential of MOOCs, necessitating the development of indigenous digital platforms to foster equitable and high-quality online education, thereby grabbing the opportunity to leverage advanced technology for contemporized learning and positioning India as a global leader in the MOOC domain (Malik & Hooda, 2023). SWAYAM, a digital initiative by the Government of India, represents a striking model of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform, delivering diverse courses across various disciplines. In May 2022, SWAYAM MOOC courses enrolled

more than 18 million students across India, implying its potential to serve as an effective platform for enhancing skills, contingent upon a successful conversion of a substantial portion of these enrolments into certifications (Singh & Kakkar). Swayam Prabha, consisting of 34 television channels, is designed to distribute high-quality educational content across diverse subjects and academic areas. The e-PG Pathshala is a popular digital platform in India, characterized by its vast repository of e-content and its role in disseminating educational resources, catering to the diverse needs of educators and learners. The initiative furnished an extensive collection of 25,169 modules spanning a spectrum of academic disciplines, encompassing social sciences, arts, humanities, languages, commerce, management, engineering and technology, as well as medical and health sciences (Kumar & Walia, 2023). Education has been supplemented by initiatives like e-Yantra and Virtual Labs, delivering hands-on robotics and remote laboratory experiences. Additionally, e-Acharya and e-Kalpa further augment the digital transformation of education, boosting the reach of high-quality educational content while encouraging skill development. DIKSHA is a digital platform launched in 2017 by NCERT and MHRD (now MOE) to enhance school education in India by providing interactive content, videos, quizzes, and e-textbooks with QR codes. As of April 24th, 2023, DIKSHA boasts 9692 courses, 16,87,79,861 course enrolments, and 13,77,53,685 course completions, receiving 2,43,444 contributions from 11,624 individuals, while maintaining its status as one of India's top-rated free educational apps on the Google Play Store since May 2020 (Kar, 2023).

#### 4. Towards more Integration of Technology and NEP 2020

Indeed, the impact of educational policies in producing the harmonious integration of technology extends beyond immediate improvements in educational quality and accessibility. It holds the latent power to fundamentally reshape the foundational principles of the educational framework. The 1968 education policy primarily emphasized practical knowledge and vocational training, with a limited focus on technology integration in education. As technology gradually became an integral aspect of the learning process, educational policies started serving as a guiding light, not only nurturing innovation but also fostering the cultivation of critical skills essential for the 21st-century workforce. The National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1986, revised in 1992, emphasised the importance of using modern educational technology to reach both remote and affluent areas, favouring broadcast methods like radio and TV for their broad reach, cost-effectiveness, and management convenience. However, their utilization for education depended on network capabilities and competition for broadcast time, mainly suited for enrichment and distance education rather than classroom instruction. The policy clearly stated, "Modern communication technologies have the potential to bypass several stages and sequences in the process of development encountered in earlier decades. Both the constraints of time and distance at once become manageable (Ministry of Education, 1986)." Giving an emphasis on technology use, the NCF (2005) also says, "The judicious use of technology can increase the reach of educational programmes, facilitate the management of the system, as well as help address specific learning needs and requirements (NCERT, 2005)."

The National Education Policy of 2020 (NEP 2020) places a resolute emphasis on digitalization, recognizing technology as an indispensable tool for nurturing 21st-century skills. Digitalization, a vital aspect of NEP 2020 across all education levels, gains momentum through lifelong learning and flexibility. It is progressively becoming central to enrolment, curriculum design, pedagogy, and evaluation, and ultimately reshaping the educational journey within the formal system (Muralidharan et al., 2022). To harness the potential of technology for teaching and learning, the policy proposes several key initiatives.

Firstly, it suggests conducting pilot studies to assess the benefits and challenges of integrating online education, addressing issues like student device (mobile) addiction and preferred e-content formats. Secondly, it emphasizes the creation of open and evolvable digital infrastructure to ensure the longevity and scalability of technology-based solutions. Thirdly, the policy recommends enhancing existing e-learning platforms like SWAYAM and DIKSHA to provide teachers with effective tools for monitoring learner progress. It also advocates for the development of a digital repository of content, including Learning Games and simulations and AR/VR materials, with user ratings for quality. Additionally, the policy addresses the digital divide by using mass media like television and radio to broadcast educational programs in multiple languages. It emphasizes teacher training in learner-centric pedagogy, online content creation, and the importance of face-to-face learning alongside digital education. The policy also calls for the establishment of standards for online/digital teaching and learning, ensuring quality and consistency across educational institutions. The policy also introduces the establishment of the National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT), which will operate as an autonomous organization. Its primary objective is to serve as a dedicated platform for the effective integration of technology across the various sectors of education mentioned earlier (Singh et al., 2022).

## 5. Digital Education and Degradation Mental Health

A rapidly flourishing body of empirical evidence and apprehension is demonstrating that the omnipresent utilization of technology, particularly among student populations of the HEIs, may engender adverse consequences, strikingly in the domain of mental health. Several studies have connected the increase in mental health symptoms among college students to the widespread adoption of personal computing technologies, particularly social media, and have indicated a direct correlation between technology usage and declining mental health (Lattie et al., 2019). College students dedicate approximately nine hours each day to their cell phones, raising concerns about the growing potential for addiction as smartphone capacities expand. (Roberts et al., 2014). Regular utilization of digital technology worsens symptoms of ADHD, disrupts emotional and social intelligence, can breed addictive tendencies, intensifies social seclusion, and hampers both brain growth and sleep patterns (Small et al., 2020). The addiction can trigger social and cognitive shifts, driven by heightened dopamine release, which generates a sense of pleasure and emotional regulation (Murphy, 2016).

- Increased screen time has become a hallmark of the negative impact of digitalization on education. As students spend more hours glued to their screens, the potential outcomes extend beyond mere eye strain, infiltrating their cognitive development, social interactions, and overall mental health and well-being. Adolescents who spent more time on screen usage showed a greater inclination toward unhealthy eating habits, lower levels of physical activity, and a higher experience of sleep disturbance (Moitra & Madan, 2022). Dry eye, sleep quality, and elevated screen time collectively constitute increasing global health concerns, necessitating the integration of preventive measures into school and college curricula to improve overall well-being and quality of life (Gupta et al., 2022).
- Nomophobia (no mobile phone phobia) has already become a pertinent crisis, notably among students in higher education institutes. This condition denotes the growing fear and anxiety associated with being without one's smartphone or mobile device. The rise of it poses a growing concern for our social, mental, and physical well-being (Bhattacharya et al., 2019). The overuse of cell phones is causing addiction and nomophobia, with anxiety and fear arising from lost contacts, low battery levels, or disconnection from the internet (Dhar & Kant, 2022). Severe nomophobia among students

is directly linked with lower academic performance and worsens anxiety, stress, and depression, leading to decreased academic achievements (Devi & Dutta, 2022). This modern plague not only hampers focus and concentration during study hours but also deteriorates the quality of personal relationships, as individuals become increasingly tethered to their devices.

- The proliferation of advanced educational technologies has led to information overload among students by providing access to a vast and complex array of information from various sources and formats, exceeding their processing capacity (Shrivastav & Hiltz, 2013). In this digital age, students find themselves wrestling with the challenge of distinguishing credible sources from the flood of available information. Consequently, the phenomenon of information overload has emerged as a noteworthy concern within educational settings, giving rise to heightened levels of anxiety and problematizing the process of making well-informed decisions.
- There exists a problematic phenomenon known as cyberbullying; a pernicious issue that unveils a fresh dimension of harm inflicted through online means. Students who become targets of such online harassment or bullying experience not only immediate distress but also potentially enduring psychological consequences. Cyberbullying often leads to depression, self-harm, feelings of inferiority, insecurities, self-doubt, and loss of inner peace in its victims due to derogatory comments and harassment (Abinayaa & Nithya, 2022). The study of Pooja & Vats (2023) also claimed that cyberbullying victims exhibit markedly elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, along with various symptoms of social and emotional maladjustment, including low self-esteem, anger, and mood disturbances. This issue also extends to negative academic outcomes, increased peer conflicts, and youth suicide.
- The digitalization of education has led to a rise in phubbing among higher education students, where they prioritize their smartphones and devices over face-to-face interactions. “Phubbing” is a portmanteau of the words “phone” and “snubbing.” It refers to the act of ignoring or neglecting someone in a social setting by focusing on a smartphone or mobile device instead. Phubbing typically refers to a situation when individuals engage with their digital devices, such as texting, browsing social media, using apps, surfing videos etc., while in the presence of others. This behaviour causes social isolation, negatively impacts mental health, and erodes essential soft skills. Davey et al. (2018) asserted that phubbing was found in 49.3% of cases, primarily linked to Internet and smartphone addiction, fear of missing out, and low self-control, with notable impacts on social and relationship health, self-flourishing, and a strong association with depression and distress.

In outline, the omnipresent usage of technology within the academic sphere has brought hurdles and challenges broadly concerning the mental health and overall welfare of higher education students. Excessive screen exposure pours adverse mental health outcomes, including aggravated anxiety, depression, and compulsive behaviours. Together, the phenomenon of nomophobia compounds stress and anxiety among students. Furthermore, the overwhelming influx of information in the digital age has given rise to the issue of information overload and misguidance, hindering decision-making ability and worsening dilemma and anxiety levels. The harmful ramifications of cyberbullying and the prevalence of phubbing present numerous threats to social skills, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Admitting the significance of these concerns, it becomes paramount for educators, institutions, and policymakers to not only acknowledge but also take proactive measures to address these challenges. Within this context, the provisions outlined in NEP 2020 about mental health have emerged as a focal point for extensive debate and discussion.

## 6. NEP 2020's Provisions for Mental Health

NEP 2020's directives regarding mental health have ignited the flame of notable discourse that stresses the critical need to align educational policies with the holistic well-being of students. The provisions serve as a crucial measure towards facilitating a learning environment that not only promotes academic excellence but also prioritizes the mental health and emotional resilience of students. In order to address the mental health requirements of students, NEP 2020 has emphasized the necessity of implementing counselling systems to manage stress and emotional adaptation among students (Patil, 2022). The policy clearly states, "There will also be professional academic and career counselling available to all students, as well as counsellors to ensure physical, psychological and emotional well-being (Ministry of Education, 2020)." This directly suggests that the institution will additionally provide comprehensive support services encompassing both academic and career guidance for all enrolled students. Moreover, there will be an adequate number of counsellors appointed with the responsibility of protecting and promoting the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of students. The intention is very clear here in creating a safe and confidential space where students of HEIs can seek guidance and assistance in dealing with academic stress, personal challenges, and emotional well-being.

The policy also recognises the stress and pressure that students often experience in the pursuit of higher educational degrees. To address this, the policy promotes a shift towards a more flexible and interdisciplinary curriculum. The policy seeks to mitigate stress and anxiety among students by diminishing the focus on memorization and high-stakes assessments. This shift is intended to enable students to delve more profoundly into their academic accomplishments and pursue a wider range of academic interests. Again, the policy also focuses on the importance of a vibrant campus life to enhance the quality of education. In this case, students will get various opportunities to participate in sports, cultural activities, eco-clubs, and community service projects. These diverse activities aim to improve mental health conditions by providing students with routes for stress relief, social interaction, and personal growth. In essence, a rich campus life complements academic goals and promotes emotional well-being. Beyond the confines of the four walls of the classroom, it offers chances for developing a sense of community, social engagement, and the cultivation of essential life skills, all of which are essential for the holistic development of individuals. Furthermore, the policy acknowledges the distinctive requirements of student populations that are vulnerable, including those from underprivileged backgrounds or with exceptional needs. There is a call for targeted support mechanisms to be in place to aid students in excelling academically while also maintaining their mental well-being.

## 7. Conclusions

Amid the ubiquitous influence of digital technology on education, the increasing concerns surrounding mental health are ultimately rising at an alarming rate with each passing day. The current state of mental health support infrastructure in most Indian schools, colleges, and universities is inadequate, hence, necessitating urgent reform. Furthermore, India allocated a mere 0.05% of its healthcare budget to mental health initiatives in 2020, a stark contrast to developed nations, which typically allocate at least 5% (Bhardwaj, 2022). These situations demand not only immediate attention but also a comprehensive and carefully crafted answer and solution that can truly handle the diverse problems and challenges. Given the seriousness of the circumstances, the stakeholders, the researchers and the policymakers must not merely acknowledge these concerns but plunge into immediate and effectual action to tackle them thoroughly. An effective action always indicates a range of coherent strategies, including the promotion

of responsible technology use, the provision of accessible mental health support, digital mental health services, awareness campaigns, and a collective effort to destigmatize mental health issues.

Despite diligent efforts, the NEP 2020 somehow may fall short of delivering a comprehensive solution to the critical issue of students' mental health. It is evident that the recommendations outlined in NEP 2020, though very significant, will remain inadequate and insufficient to fully address the multifaceted mental health concerns aggravated by the digitalization of education. It is so that the provisions within NEP 2020, while commendable, may not fully cage the complex issues affecting mental health within digital education. The omnipresence of technology is continuously throwing diverse challenges that necessitate a more nuanced and workable approach. From the decrease in attention spans to the increase in misinformation, misguidance and the decline of privacy and security, the digital space offers a complex scenario where educators, policymakers, and society at large must unite to handle the ever-increasing adverse consequences of technology. Again, it is so that minority groups often face unique challenges that can contribute to higher rates of mental health issues, indicating a more dedicated approach to address their specific needs, but the policy is failing to recognize the increased vulnerability to mental health issues experienced by those minority populations (Pandit, 2021). This immediately stresses the urgency of implementing more practical strategies to ensure that mental health support is both accessible and equitable for all members of society, irrespective of their class, creed, race, gender, sex, caste etc.

To conclude, NEP 2020 takes some excellent steps towards recognizing mental health concerns that demand a thunderbolt of claps and cheering of appraisal and appreciation. However, the rapidly evolving landscape of digital education is urging to require a more holistic and adaptable approach to safeguard the mental well-being of students effectively. The roaring applause will continue, but it should serve as a constant reminder of the need for ongoing assessment, adjustment, and innovation in addressing the diverse challenges posed by the digital era, also ensuring that, at the same time, Indian educational systems not only keep pace with technological advancements and enhancement but also prioritize the mental health and overall development of the next generation of students. Only through such unwavering dedication and commitment, one can truly ensure a brighter and more balanced future for students.

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