

Promoting Positive Mental Health, Resilience, and Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions of India

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Abstract:

The well-being of students in higher education institutions is a multifaceted concept encompassing mental, emotional, physical, and various social aspects. Mental Health and wellbeing in education transcends academic learning, encompassing social and environmental awareness among students. A holistic approach is essential in today's world, where students must be equipped not only with knowledge but also with resilience and adaptability to thrive in a rapidly changing environment that affects students' well-being. In this evolving educational scenario, innovations that focus on well-being play a very important role. Higher education Institutions (HEIs) have a major role to play in adopting practices and equipping themselves with expertise needed to offer a strengthened system that promotes mental health, resilience, and well-being of students. This paper highlights the various dimensions of student well-being in India's higher education sector, highlighting challenges and potential solutions.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Mental health, Resilience, Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

Introduction:

The Indian Higher Education System is undergoing a radical transformation to create a competitive ecosystem for the well-being of students and faculties. For the development of the nation and society, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) should be the center of Lifelong learning. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 enjoins countries to promote lifelong opportunities for all. HEIs are in a unique position to promote sustainable societies through their expertise in knowledge production, skill development, and academic exchange in a holistic manner.

The health and wellbeing of students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India have become a critical area of concern due to the growing prevalence of mental health issues, lifestyle challenges, and the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A paradigm shift is needed in how educational institutions in India view success. Focusing only on academic achievement while neglecting the mental health of students is unsustainable. HEIs should promote a culture of holistic well-being, emphasizing emotional and psychological health alongside academic performance. This can be achieved by integrating mental health support for students into the core values of the institution and ensuring that counselling services are available to all students, regardless of their background.

MENTAL WELL BEING OF STUDENTS AT HEIS

The holistic approach to education encompasses the well-being of learners' minds, bodies, and spirits, i.e., psychological, social, and mental aspects (Agrawal & Sharma, 2022). It is important to note that the life of HEI students has its challenges, but at the same time, it acts as a bridge for their successful future.

The mental health and well-being of HEIs students have increased substantially during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. There still exists a stigma that does not permit free conversations around mental well-being. HEIS needs to provide an open and inclusive environment that would encourage open dialogue. Capacity building to sensitize stakeholders is also vital. This indicates a strong need for immediate intervention strategies, as the mental well-being of students is imperative for their holistic development of students.

The online environment has been shown to impact students' emotional health. Research indicates, for example, that adolescents receiving positive reactions to their social media presence have higher self-esteem and are more satisfied with life ([Ahn, 2011](#)). On the other hand, social media that is perceived to be negative, including social rejection and cyberbullying, can negatively affect an individual's emotional state ([Cho u and Edge, 2011](#); [NASEM, 2020](#)). Social media may also be biased and skew perceptions of normative behaviour ranging from body image, substance use, socializing and partying, and other behaviours that can enhance feelings of loneliness, decrease a feeling of belonging or welcome, and limit connection to others ([Huang et al., 2014](#); [Zhu, 2017](#)).

We still have a very conventional Education System:

Although the world is rapidly advancing in technology and pedagogy, Indian classrooms remain largely unchanged. As traditional lecture-based teaching continues to dominate, there is little room left for creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. With how rigid this approach is, it has become a hindrance to student engagement. It also poses an immense bout of psychological pressure on the young minds that contribute to anxiety, burnout, and in extreme cases, tragic instances of students committing suicide. The days of a faculty member delivering a monologue to disinterested, bored, and inattentive students should have been over years ago.

Mental Health Issues in Higher Education:

The endless pressure faced by students to excel in examinations, the stigma associated with failure, and the absence of structured mental health support collectively create an environment where students struggle in silence. Sadly, the efforts being made to address these issues are reactionary rather than preventative. We tend to respond only once crises hit the door, rather than implementing proactive strategies to improve students' emotional resilience and well-being from an early stage.

Breaking Free from Rote Learning: Time to Bring in AI in classrooms.

Over-reliance on rote memorization has become one of the most damaging aspects of our education system. Instead of fostering curiosity and innovation in students, they are trained to memorise and reproduce information without truly understanding the concepts. Along with diminishing students' ability to apply knowledge in real-world scenarios, this practice also suppresses students' independent thinking. To build a workforce that is ready to face the challenges of the twenty-first century, we need to encourage active learning, critical analysis, and experiential education.

Mental Health Challenges Among Students

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues

Mental health issues among students in Indian HEIs is a growing concern. Studies indicate a high preval-

ence of anxiety, depression, and stress, which significantly impact students' academic performance and overall well-being. For instance, a study conducted in Telangana found that factors contributing to poor mental health were rated highly by students, suggesting a need for targeted interventions to address these issues (Velagapaly & Bolla, 2023). Another study revealed that 28% of professional students reported symptoms of borderline to severe depression, emphasizing the need for better psychological health services at the institutional level (Rishi et al., 2021).

Academic Pressure and Performance

Academic pressure is a significant contributor to mental health challenges. Research shows that students who experience academic difficulties or interpersonal issues are more likely to seek support, highlighting the importance of academic engagement in mental health outcomes. A study using structural equation modeling found that academic engagement partially mediates the relationship between family support and psychological well-being, underscoring the role of academic performance in overall mental health (Chaudhry et al., 2024).

The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges among students. A study conducted during the pandemic found that students who tested positive for COVID-19 reported significantly lower scores in social and emotional health domains, while those in isolation or quarantine showed higher scores, suggesting the need for targeted support for students affected by the virus (Sarkar et al., 2022).

Other Factors Influencing Student Wellbeing

Lifestyle and Behavioural Factors

Lifestyle factors such as screen time, sleep patterns, and physical activity play a crucial role in student well-being. A study on undergraduate students in different parts of India found that while most students had proper sleep schedules, excessive screen time was prevalent, potentially impacting mental health. Another study highlighted the importance of health behaviours such as regular exercise, a balanced diet, and adequate sleep in promoting happiness and overall well-being (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2013).

Social and Family Support

Social and family support are critical determinants of student well-being. Family support positively relates to psychological well-being, while academic engagement mediates this relationship. The role of positive interpersonal relationships and a congenial family environment in facilitating positive mental health outcomes.

Institutional and Team Environment

The role of institutional support and team environment in student well-being cannot be overstated. A positive internal team environment and institutional support positively relate to psychological well-being, with academic engagement acting as a mediator. Similarly, the effectiveness of structured services in promoting student mental health, with counsellors providing interventions and referrals for students with severe mental health issues, plays a pivotal role.

Promoting Wellbeing through Structural Approach

Mindfulness and Resilience

Mindfulness and resilience have been identified as key factors in promoting student wellbeing. A study on university students during the COVID-19 pandemic found that resilience partially mediates the relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being, highlighting the importance of mindfulness

interventions in fostering resilience (Bharti et al., 2023).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been shown to impact mental well-being. Hence, HEIs must strengthen the trait of emotional intelligence (TEI), which significantly enhances the mental well-being of students.

Structured Mental Health Programs

Structured mental health programs have been effective in addressing student mental health issues. HEIs must organise psychological well-being of students by providing counsellors and peer members for understanding the various issues of students, which they are mostly reluctant to share with Family members and faculties.

Spirituality and Occupational Perspectives

Spirituality and occupational perspectives have also been explored as potential strategies for promoting student well-being. Spirituality is always positively correlated with subjective happiness, meaning in life, and satisfaction with life, suggesting the integration of spiritual practices into mental health interventions. The role of daily habits and routines is also essential in maintaining positive mental health, highlighting the importance of occupational perspectives in promoting well-being.

Gender Differences in Health and Wellbeing

Wellness Lifestyles

Gender differences in wellness lifestyles have been observed among students HEIs. Male students were found to excel in health-related fitness and stress management, while female students were better in nutrition and personal hygiene. However, both genders needed improvement in disease prevention and environmental health (Malhotra & Malhotra, 2024).

Health Behaviours

Health behaviours also vary by gender. A study on university students found that male students were more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours such as regular exercise and healthy eating, while female students were more likely to prioritize mental health and stress management (Peltzer et al., 2014).

Mental Health Support

Gender differences in mental health support-seeking behaviours have been noted. Female students were more likely to seek support for mental health issues, while male students were more likely to experience stigma and barriers to seeking help (Roy & Sahai, 2024).

The Different Physical, Emotional, social, and Institutional Issues, with their own set of challenges and solutions, are discussed below precisely.

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Challenges

1. **Academic Pressure:** Students often face high expectations to excel academically, which can lead to stress and anxiety.
2. **Cultural Adjustment:** India attracts students from different regions and backgrounds, who may experience culture shock or homesickness.
3. **Limited Mental Health Resources:** Access to mental health professionals and services is limited, which can hinder timely intervention and support.

Solutions

- **Counselling Services:** Institutions can establish or enhance counselling centres staffed with trained professionals to provide support and guidance.

- Workshops and Seminars: Regular workshops on stress management, mindfulness, and emotional resilience can help students cope with academic and personal pressures.
- Peer Support Groups: Encouraging peer-led initiatives can create a supportive community where students share experiences and advice.

Physical Well-being

Challenges

1. Sedentary Lifestyle: With technology and academic demands, students may lead a sedentary lifestyle, impacting their physical health.
2. Dietary Concerns: Access to nutritious food may be inconsistent, affecting students' energy levels and overall health.

Solutions

- Health and Fitness Programs: Institutions can offer fitness classes, sports activities, and wellness programs to promote an active lifestyle.
- Healthy Dining Options: Providing nutritious meal options and facilities in HEIs can encourage healthier eating habits.

Social Well-being

Challenges

1. Social Integration: Students from diverse backgrounds may struggle with integration and forming social connections.
2. Isolation: The geographical remoteness of some institutions can contribute to feelings of isolation among students.

Solutions

- Cultural and Social Events: Organizing events that celebrate diversity and encourage interaction can promote social integration.
- Student Organizations: Establishing clubs and societies based on interests can help students find communities and build friendships.

Institutional Support

Policies and Initiatives

Higher education institutions in India can implement policies that prioritize student well-being, such as:

- Inclusive Policies: Creating an inclusive environment that respects and values diversity.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Establishing channels for students to voice their concerns and provide feedback on their educational experience.
- Collaboration with Local Health Services: Partnering with local health services to improve access to mental and physical health resources.

The education system of India is now at a crucial and critical point, with one in five students suffering from some mental health issue that requires urgent care and attention. While the country has progressed in expanding access to education with more than thirty thousand colleges and over 1000+ universities, a deeper examination of classroom dynamics reveals the persistent flaws that require an urgent reform.

The Need for Preventative Measures in Mental Health

As the current model of mental health intervention in HEIs is largely post-mortem-action that is taken only after visible distress signals emerge, this approach fails to address the root cause of stress amongst students. Academic pressure, social isolation, and unrealistic expectations are the primary causes of distress among students. HEIs must integrate mental wellness programmes into their curriculum to provide

easy access to counselling services and normalize conversations around mental health. It is the need of the hour to provide on-campus support for strong mental health with well-trained and qualified counsellors.

Conclusion

The health and wellbeing of students in Higher Education Institutions in India are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including mental health challenges, lifestyle and behavioural factors, social and family support, and institutional environment. To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Promote Mental Health Literacy:** Institutions should prioritize mental health literacy through awareness programs and workshops to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviours.
2. **Implement Structured Mental Health Programs:** The success of programs like JEEVANI in Kerala highlights the need for structured mental health services in HEIs across India.
3. **Foster Resilience and Mindfulness:** Interventions that promote mindfulness and resilience should be integrated into student well-being programs to enhance mental health outcomes.
4. **Encourage Health-Promoting Behaviours:** Institutions should promote health-promoting behaviours through initiatives such as fitness programs, nutrition workshops, and stress management sessions.
5. **Address Gender Differences:** Tailored interventions should be developed to address gender-specific needs and promote inclusivity for LGBTQ students.
6. **Enhance Academic and Social Support:** Strengthening academic support systems and fostering a positive team environment can significantly improve psychological well-being among students.

By addressing these factors and implementing targeted interventions, HEIs in India can create a supportive environment that promotes the holistic well-being of their students.

The well-being of students in India's higher education institutions is vital for their academic success and personal growth. By addressing mental, emotional, physical, and social aspects of well-being, institutions can create a supportive and nurturing environment. Through strategic initiatives and community engagement, India can continue to be a beacon of educational excellence and holistic development.

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