

Rethinking Student Mental Health in Indian Higher Education: Building Enabling Institutional Ecosystems

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Abstract

Student mental health has emerged as a major concern within higher education in India, particularly in the context of rising academic stress, emotional distress, social isolation, and increasing reports of student suicides. Although many higher education institutions (HEIs) have expanded counseling services and awareness initiatives, responses often remain fragmented, individualized, and crisis-oriented. This paper argues for a shift from narrowly counseling-centered approaches toward ecosystem-oriented understandings of student mental health. Drawing upon ecological perspectives, particularly Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the paper conceptualizes HEIs as psychosocial ecosystems where relationships, institutional cultures, and support structures shape student well-being. It critically examines the limitations of prevailing institutional approaches and highlights the importance of enabling environments characterized by inclusion, belongingness, participation, and psychological safety.

The paper further situates these concerns within the evolving policy discourse on student mental health in India. It argues that meaningful mental health promotion requires integrating well-being into institutional culture, pedagogy, student engagement, and campus governance rather than confining it to counseling services alone. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for culturally grounded, preventive, and ecosystem-oriented approaches to student well-being within Indian higher education.

Keywords: *Student mental health, Higher education institutions Institutional ecosystems, Psychosocial well-being, and Indian higher education*

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1 Introduction

Student mental health has emerged as a major concern within higher education systems globally. Increasing reports of anxiety, stress, loneliness, academic burnout, emotional distress, and uncertainty regarding the future have drawn attention to the psychosocial experiences of young people navigating university life. The transition to higher education coincides with a critical developmental phase characterized by identity formation, changing social relationships, academic pressures, and growing expectations regarding employability and success. Universities therefore function not only as spaces of academic learning but also as important social environments shaping students' psychological well-being and sense of belonging (Suresh & Dar, 2025).

Concerns regarding student mental health have intensified globally, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified existing vulnerabilities within educational systems. Studies across contexts have reported increasing levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion among university students (Anand, 2024, 2023; Gururaj et al., 2016). At the same time, scholars have cautioned against viewing student distress solely through individualized or clinical frameworks, emphasizing that mental health concerns are deeply shaped by broader institutional, social, and structural conditions (Kirkbride et al., 2024). This has contributed to growing interest in ecological and institution-wide approaches to student well-being.

Within the Indian context, student mental health has gained increasing policy and public attention over the past decade. The Economic Survey 2024-25 identified youth mental well-being as critical to India's demographic dividend and long-term economic growth. Competitive academic cultures, pressure to succeed, financial insecurities, migration away from home, language barriers, social inequalities, and uncertainty regarding employment contribute significantly to psychosocial stress among students. Rising concerns regarding student suicides have further intensified attention toward mental health within educational institutions. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2026), 14,488 students died by suicide in 2024 alone. Despite growing awareness, responses within many higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to remain fragmented, reactive, and largely counseling-centered.

Most institutional responses focus primarily on counselling services, stress management programmes, and crisis response mechanisms. While important, such approaches often fail to address the broader institutional and relational contexts within which student distress emerges. Unequal access to counselling services, stigma surrounding help-seeking, exclusionary campus cultures, excessive academic competition, social isolation, discrimination, and weak peer support systems continue to shape student experiences within higher education spaces.

Emerging perspectives within educational psychology and public mental health increasingly emphasize ecosystem-oriented understandings of student well-being. Ecological perspectives suggest that mental health is shaped not only by individual coping capacities but also by the quality of relationships, institutional cultures, support systems, and opportunities for participation and belonging within educational environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Universities may therefore be understood as psychosocial ecosystems that can either enable or constrain well-being. Supportive peer networks, inclusive campus climates, mentoring relationships, participatory spaces, and meaningful student engagement can contribute toward psychologically supportive educational environments.

Policy developments in India have also begun to acknowledge the importance of holistic educational ecosystems. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, inclusion, and student-centered educational environments. However, translating these aspirations into meaningful institutional practices remains a significant challenge.

Against this backdrop, the present paper argues for a shift from narrowly individualized approaches toward ecosystem-oriented understandings of student mental health in Indian higher education. It critically examines the limitations of counseling-centered responses and highlights the importance of enabling institutional environments that foster belongingness, participation, relational support, and psychosocial well-being.

2 Limitations of Current Institutional Approaches to Student Mental Health

Institutional responses to student mental health within higher education have expanded considerably in recent years. Universities and colleges have increasingly

introduced counseling services, wellness cells, helplines, awareness campaigns, and stress management programs in response to growing concerns regarding student distress. While these developments reflect important recognition of mental health within educational spaces, current approaches often remain limited in both conceptualization and implementation.

A major limitation of prevailing responses is their reliance on individualized and counselling-centred models that frame student distress primarily as a personal psychological problem requiring therapeutic intervention or coping strategies. While counselling services remain important, excessive dependence on such approaches risks overlooking the broader institutional, relational, and structural conditions contributing to distress (Purohit, 2024). Academic competition, fear of failure, financial insecurity, social isolation, discrimination, and employment uncertainty are often embedded within institutional cultures and social inequalities rather than merely individual vulnerabilities (Anand, 2024; Anand & Thekkedath, 2024). Overemphasis on resilience and coping may therefore shift responsibility onto students while leaving institutional practices insufficiently examined.

In many higher education institutions (HEIs), mental health interventions continue to function largely as reactive mechanisms rather than as part of preventive and enabling institutional cultures. Persistent stigma, fear of judgement, concerns regarding confidentiality, and lack of trust in institutional systems discourage many students from seeking formal psychological support (Anand, 2023). In the Indian context, these limitations are further compounded by uneven access to trained professionals, inadequate counselling infrastructure, and insufficient institutional commitment toward student well-being, particularly within public and resource-constrained institutions (Murthy, 2025).

Another important limitation is the tendency to treat mental health as separate from the everyday functioning of educational institutions. Student well-being is often addressed through isolated programmes rather than being integrated into pedagogy, student engagement, campus relationships, and institutional governance. Consequently, mental health initiatives frequently remain peripheral instead of becoming part of the lived culture of higher education institutions.

These limitations highlight the need to move beyond crisis-driven and individualized responses toward ecosystem-oriented approaches that recognize the role of belongingness, inclusion, relational support, participation, and institutional culture in shaping student well-being within higher education.

3 An Ecological Understanding of Student Mental Health

Ecological perspectives have gained increasing attention in educational psychology and public mental health for emphasizing the interconnected environments that shape psychosocial well-being. Rather than viewing mental health solely as an individual attribute, ecological approaches locate student well-being within dynamic relationships between individuals, institutions, communities, and wider sociocultural structures.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory remains one of the most influential frameworks in this regard, conceptualizing human development as shaped by multiple interacting systems including family, peers, educational institutions, and broader social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, universities and colleges are not merely academic spaces but psychosocial ecosystems that shape experiences of belonging, participation, recognition, stress, and support.

Within higher education institutions (HEIs), student well-being is influenced by everyday experiences such as faculty interactions, peer relationships, campus climate, academic expectations, institutional responsiveness, and opportunities for participation. Supportive environments may foster connectedness, confidence, and resilience, while exclusionary or highly competitive cultures may contribute to anxiety, alienation, and emotional distress.

A key contribution of the ecological lens is its emphasis on relationality and belongingness. Positive peer networks, mentoring relationships, supportive faculty interactions, and inclusive campus communities can function as important protective factors for student well-being. Research within Positive Psychology similarly identifies belongingness, relatedness, and social connectedness as central dimensions of psychological well-being (Carr, 2004). In the Indian context, students' experiences of mental health are also shaped by inequalities related to caste, class, gender, language, disability, sexuality, and regional identity, making institutional sensitivity and inclusion especially important.

Ecological approaches further emphasize that promoting student well-being cannot remain confined to counselling services alone. Mental health becomes a shared institutional responsibility involving administrators, faculty members, peer groups, institutional policies, and support systems. This perspective broadens mental health promotion beyond crisis response by recognizing the importance of participation, co-curricular engagement, creativity, peer interaction, and inclusive campus cultures in fostering psychosocial well-being. Enabling institutional ecosystems therefore foster not only academic achievement but also belongingness, dignity, participation, relational support, and emotional safety. Presented below are key strategies for adopting a more holistic and ecological approach to student mental health in HEIs.

4 Strategies for Building Enabling Ecosystems in HEIs

4.1 Changing the Mental Health Narrative

Local Solutions, Universal Perspectives: Higher education institutions (HEIs) must be viewed not merely as centres of academic learning, but as psychosocial spaces that shape students' experiences of belonging, participation, recognition, and emotional well-being. This requires universities to actively foster cultures of care, inclusion, and psychosocial support. There is also an urgent need to fundamentally shift the dominant narrative around mental health within higher education (Murthy, 2024):

- from mental illness to mental health
- from patients to populations
- from insanity to sanity
- from clinic to community

Such a shift requires universities to move beyond narrowly treatment-oriented approaches toward preventive and promotive frameworks. The focus should not remain limited to responding to distress after crises emerge, but on creating emotionally supportive and psychologically healthy educational ecosystems. Institutions must recognize that students enter universities with diverse life experiences, emotional vulnerabilities, family contexts, childhood experiences, and social realities that shape their mental well-being.

Approaches to student mental health therefore need to remain local in solutions and universal in perspectives. Universities must understand how stress, uncertainty, social pressures, and emotional vulnerabilities are affecting students' lives, while also drawing upon local cultural resources, community traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and reflective practices within Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions to develop innovative and contextually relevant mental health responses.

4.2 Promoting a culture of Self-care

Universities, in the post-pandemic scenario, have an important responsibility to create and enable mentally healthy students, with the primary focus of action centred on the individual. Educational environments must therefore encourage students to consciously learn how to care for their own physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, with the larger goal of developing balance, resilience, and equanimity in everyday life. HEIs can promote emotionally healthy cultures by integrating self-care and life skills education into student life. This may include encouraging healthy sleep, regular physical exercise, adequate nutrition, mindfulness, stress and anger management, emotional regulation, digital detoxification, journaling, spirituality, and healthy “me time” practices. Such initiatives recognize that student mental health is shaped not only by individual factors, but also by broader academic, social, and institutional environments. Creating supportive environments that encourage positive lifestyles and preventive mental health practices can contribute to the holistic development of students, improved academic engagement, and reduced psychosocial distress.

4.3 Relational Support Systems

One important dimension of enabling ecosystems is the creation of supportive relational environments within campuses. Normalizing conversations around mental health and reducing stigma within classrooms and campuses are equally important. Students often navigate multiple forms of stress related to academic expectations, social adjustment, identity formation, financial pressures, and uncertainty regarding future careers. In such contexts, supportive peer networks, mentoring relationships, and approachable faculty members can function as

important protective factors (Anand, 2024). Institutions therefore need to strengthen peer mentoring programmes, student support groups, faculty mentorship systems, and safe spaces for dialogue and emotional expression.

4.4 Inclusive Campus Culture

Institutional cultures that encourage inclusion, collaboration, participation, and recognition can enhance students' sense of belonging and psychological safety. Universities therefore need to critically examine the implicit values and practices embedded within campus life, including how success, achievement, discipline, and participation are experienced by students. Increasingly, campuses are moving beyond centralized counselling models toward more holistic approaches that equip faculty and staff as first-line responders to student distress (Murthy, 2025).

4.5 Integrating Mental Health into Institutional Processes

Mental health promotion needs to become part of the everyday functioning of institutions rather than remaining confined to specialized services or awareness events. Well-being considerations can be integrated into teaching-learning processes, orientation programmes, academic advising, student engagement activities, hostel life, and campus governance structures. Faculty sensitization is particularly important, as teachers often serve as the first point of contact for students experiencing emotional difficulties. Developing empathetic communication skills, early identification of 'at-risk' students, and referral awareness among faculty can significantly strengthen supportive educational environments.

4.6 Co-curricular Participation and Student Engagement

Co-curricular and participatory spaces may contribute meaningfully to enabling ecosystems when they are experienced as inclusive, collaborative, and identity-affirming. Participation in arts, sports, student clubs, cultural activities, NSS, NCC and community engagement initiatives can foster self-expression, social connectedness, confidence-building, and stress management. Institutions therefore need to ensure that co-curricular spaces remain accessible, inclusive, and supportive for diverse student groups.

4.7 Digital Ecosystems and Student Well-being

Digital environments have become an integral part of student life within higher education. While social media pressures, online comparison cultures, cyberbullying, academic surveillance, and digital overload may contribute to anxiety and emotional fatigue, digital platforms can also serve as important spaces for connection, awareness-building, peer support, and mental health advocacy. Higher education institutions (HEIs) therefore need to engage proactively with the digital dimensions of student well-being. Universities can use official digital platforms such as Instagram pages, institutional websites, YouTube channels, podcasts, and LinkedIn networks to promote mental health awareness, self-care practices, life skills, and help-seeking information. Dedicated mental health links, student support resources, expert talks, interactive sessions, survivor stories, and student-led campaigns can be integrated into these platforms. Documenting lived experiences and recovery narratives online may help normalize conversations around mental health and reduce stigma among students. Since Gen Z students are highly digitally engaged, universities need to ensure that accessible, credible, and youth-friendly mental health content remains actively available throughout the academic year rather than being limited to occasional awareness events.

4.8 Equity, Inclusion, and Psychosocial Vulnerability

In the Indian context, building enabling institutional ecosystems must also involve greater sensitivity toward diversity, inequality, and social marginalization. Students from historically marginalized communities, those with adverse childhood experiences, first-generation learners, linguistic minorities, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds may experience higher levels of exclusion and psychosocial vulnerability within higher education spaces. Institutional support systems therefore need to move beyond universal approaches and adopt more inclusive and equity-oriented practices that recognize the varied social realities students bring into educational settings.

4.9 Institutionalizing Student Mental Health Support and Research

Creating enabling ecosystems implies adopting a humane and sensitive approach toward student mental health as an important dimension of educational quality

and institutional responsibility. Establishing a center for mental health and well-being in every college and university as a nodal institutional mechanism can play an important role in coordinating mental health promotion, self-care initiatives, counseling support, peer engagement, digital outreach, and referral services. There is also a strong need to promote continuous research on student mental health to better understand emerging psychosocial challenges, institutional stressors, help-seeking behaviors, and the changing realities of student life in India.

5 Indian Context and Policy Relevance

Student mental health has acquired growing policy relevance within India's higher education landscape due to increasing concerns regarding academic stress, emotional distress, social isolation, and rising student suicides. These concerns have become particularly significant within a rapidly expanding and highly competitive higher education system marked by widening social diversity and intensified academic and career pressures.

Policy developments in recent years have increasingly acknowledged the importance of holistic and supportive educational environments. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasized multidisciplinary, inclusive, and student-centred learning ecosystems that support students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, translating these aspirations into institutional practice remains a major challenge, as many higher education institutions continue to function within highly performance-oriented cultures.

The growing national concern regarding student suicides has further shaped policy and legal discourse on student mental health. In its landmark judgement dated 25 July 2025, the Supreme Court of India recognized mental health as integral to the constitutional right to life under Article 21 and directed educational institutions to adopt comprehensive mental health policies. The judgement referred to important national initiatives including the UMMEED Draft Guidelines, Manodarpan, and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (2022), all of which emphasized preventive, supportive, and institution-wide approaches to student well-being.

More recently, the University Grants Commission's draft UGC Guidelines on Uniform Policy on Mental Health & Well-Being for Higher Educational Institutions (2026)

proposed counselor-student ratios, well-being centers, peer-support systems, crisis management mechanisms, and institutional mental health policies across universities and colleges.

Despite these important developments, significant implementation gaps continue to persist, particularly within public and resource-constrained institutions. While policy attention has increased visibility around student mental health, responses often remain individualized and crisis-oriented. Building enabling institutional ecosystems therefore requires integrating mental health within broader educational practices, campus governance, student engagement, and institutional support structures to create more inclusive and psychologically safe higher education environments.

6 Conclusion

Student mental health has emerged as an urgent concern within Indian higher education, requiring responses that move beyond fragmented, counseling-centered, and crisis-driven approaches. While psychological support services remain important, student well-being is deeply shaped by institutional cultures, social inequalities, academic pressures, and experiences of belongingness within educational spaces.

This paper argues that higher education institutions must be understood as psychosocial ecosystems where relationships, participation, campus climate, institutional practices, and support structures collectively influence student well-being. Promoting mental health, therefore, cannot remain confined to counseling centers alone; it must become an integral part of institutional planning, pedagogy, student engagement, faculty development, and campus governance.

Recent initiatives such as NEP 2020; Manodarpan; the UMMEED Draft Guidelines; the National Suicide Prevention Strategy; the Supreme Court's 2025 judgment on student suicides; and the UGC's proposed mental health guidelines reflect growing national recognition of the need for preventive, inclusive, and institution-wide approaches to student well-being. However, meaningful change will depend on translating these policy commitments into sustained institutional practices across diverse higher education settings.

Building enabling institutional ecosystems that foster dignity, inclusion, participation, relational support, and psychological safety is therefore essential for creating more humane, equitable, and socially responsive higher education institutions in India. This also requires decolonising mental health within higher education by moving beyond narrowly individualized and imported clinical frameworks toward culturally grounded and contextually responsive understandings of student well-being.

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