SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;
Impact Factor: 8.175 (SJIF) ISSN**:** 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 9(September)2025**

From Surviving to Thriving:Integrating Emotional Well-Being into Higher Education Curricula

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Article Received: 19/08/2025
Article Accepted: 27/09/2025
Published Online: 28/09/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.569

Abstract

As academic pressure, mental health challenges, and emotional burnout become increasingly common in universities, the need to revamp higher education through the lens of student well-being has never been more urgent. This paper explores how emotional resilience, empathy, and meaning can be the foundational elements rather than optional extras. Drawing on Martin Seligman's PERMA model and the philosophy of holistic education, the study synthesizes global educational frameworks, policy documents, and insights from Indian institutions to assess the current state of emotional learning in academia. Based on student voices and existing literature, the study was conducted. Findings reveal a significant gap between student needs and faculty preparedness, alongside widespread student support for well-being-centered curriculum reforms. The paper concludes with practical, actionable recommendations for integrating emotional education into formal academic structures, arguing that this shift is not only necessary but essential to preparing students for both professional and personal life.

Keywords: Higher education, policies, emotional education, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

In recent years, concern has grown about the complex challenges students face in higher education, not only in academic performance but also in their mental and emotional well-being. While universities continue to emphasize academic excellence and career readiness, students increasingly complain of stress, burnout, anxiety, and a diminished sense

of purpose. These trends raise questions about the current educational system and the holistic development of learners. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates a more integrative learner-centered approach, practical realities in many institutions are far from this ideal. Well-being is an ancillary concern, away from the formal curriculum and addressed through isolated support services or extracurricular programming. As a result, the emotional, psychological, and existential dimensions of student life are neglected in academic planning. This paper argues that the curriculum that emphasizes academic success at the cost of personal growth should be reconsidered. It explores how institutions of higher learning can move beyond traditional content delivery to actively cultivate emotional resilience, empathy, and a sense of meaning in their students. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from education, psychology, and the learning sciences, the paper proposes embedding well-being into the core educational experience, not as an optional add-on but as an essential component of effective humane pedagogy.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper relies on two interrelated conceptual foundations: the PERMA model of well-being by Martin Seligman, and the principles of Holistic Education rooted in both ancient traditions and progressive pedagogies. Together, these frameworks offer a perspective on how educational institutions can support not only intellectual growth but also emotional and psychological aspects.

2.1 The PERMA Model: A Framework for Flourishing

Developed in positive psychology, the PERMA model posits five core elements essential to human well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. These dimensions provide a comprehensive structure for evaluating quality of life and mental health, making it a valuable tool for assessing student experience in higher education.

1. **Positive Emotions**: Beyond academic stress, do students feel moments of joy, hope, or inspiration in their learning environments? Or has survival mode become the default?
2. **Engagement**: Are students actively immersed in their studies, or are they mentally checked out? True engagement requires that learners are challenged, motivated, and able to experience flow in their work.
3. **Relationships**: What is the nature of students' social lives? Are they forming supportive friendships and mentorships, or do interactions remain transactional and limited to group assignments and competitive comparisons?

4. **Meaning**: Do students see a larger purpose in their education? Is their work connected to values or causes that resonate with their identity and sense of self?
5. **Accomplishment**: Beyond grades, do students feel a sustained sense of growth, competence, and achievement?

By applying the PERMA framework to academic settings, universities can assess not only academic performance but also psychological resilience and life satisfaction, both of which are crucial for long-term success.

2.2 Holistic Education: Educating the Whole Person

While the PERMA model offers a psychological structure, holistic education provides a pedagogical philosophy. These approaches have deep roots in educational history, from the Indian *gurukula* tradition, which emphasized spiritual, moral, and physical development, to Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf education, which promotes the integration of imagination, intellect, and emotional intelligence. At its core, holistic education is built on the belief that learning should engage the mind, body, and spirit. It prioritizes: self-awareness and emotional literacy, empathy and social responsibility, purposeful learning, beyond rote memorization, creativity, reflection, and ethical decision-making. In this view, education is not simply about preparing students for jobs but about cultivating thoughtful, grounded, and compassionate individuals. For college curricula to be truly transformative, they must adopt the full spectrum of human development and not just the academic.

3. Literature Review

Research from different fields supports the view that emotional intelligence, mental health, and strong relationships are not just extra benefits for academic achievement; they are essential for it.

Scholars such as Nel Noddings, a pioneer in the ethics of care, argue that education cannot thrive in emotionally sterile environments. Her work emphasizes the importance of caring relationships between teachers and students, as well as among peers for meaningful learning. Similarly, Marc Brackett, founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, has demonstrated that students who learn to identify, understand, and regulate their emotions perform better academically and exhibit fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

These findings resonate across global contexts. A report by the World Health Organization notes that nearly one in four college students suffers from a mental health disorder, highlighting the urgent need for emotional support systems embedded within

academic environments. In India, Vinod Kumar and other education researchers have critiqued the overwhelming focus on examination scores and rote memorization. Kumar warns that despite the transformative aspirations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, few Indian institutions have taken concrete steps to integrate emotional and social learning into their formal curricula. As a result, students often navigate college life without the tools needed to process stress, build self-understanding, or find personal meaning in their education. These scholarly insights point to a clear imperative: higher education must evolve from an instrument of awarding credits to becoming a space for human development. Emotional well-being is central to both individual success and the collective health of academic communities.

4. Methodology

To explore how emotional well-being can be meaningfully integrated into higher education, this study adopted a qualitative, multi-source approach, drawing insights from diverse yet complementary data points. The methodology consists of three key components:

1. Document Analysis: Foundational texts, academic literature, and policy documents, including India's *National Education Policy 2020*, UNESCO reports on education for well-being, and global frameworks on social-emotional learning, were reviewed to establish the theoretical and policy context for well-being in education.
2. Student Survey: A purposive sample of 100 undergraduate students from two urban colleges was surveyed. The survey included quantitative and open-ended questions to capture students lived experiences of academic stress, their emotional coping mechanisms, and their perspectives on integrating well-being into the curriculum.
3. Case Studies: Two higher education institutions, IIT Delhi and Ashoka University, were selected for their contrasting yet innovative approaches to student well-being. These case studies were based on institutional reports, student testimonials, and faculty interviews.
4. Together, these sources provided a holistic view of the gap between policy aspirations and institutional practices, as well as insights into what meaningful integration of well-being might look like on campus.

5. Case Studies

5.1 IIT Delhi: Progress in a Pressure Cooker

Known for its academic rigor and competitive atmosphere, IIT Delhi is no stranger to student stress. Long study hours, high-stakes evaluations, and intense peer competition often leave students vulnerable to anxiety and burnout. However, in recent years, the institution has begun acknowledging these pressures and responding with tangible initiatives. The

Student Wellness Centre provides professional counselling, psychological support, and stress management resources. In addition, the institute hosts regular seminars on emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-care, reflecting a growing recognition that technical excellence must be accompanied by emotional competence. Student-led clubs have also taken the lead, organizing mental health awareness campaigns, peer support circles, and open mic events to talk about anxiety and failure topics once considered taboo. That said, most of these efforts still take place outside the formal academic space. While co-curricular support is commendable, institutional leaders have shown a growing interest in integrating these concerns into the curriculum, suggesting a shift from reactive support to proactive education on emotional well-being.

5.2 Ashoka University: Embedding Well-Being into Learning

Unlike IIT Delhi's externally focused approach, Ashoka University adopts a more integrated, liberal arts model of education, where emotional and intellectual growth are deeply interconnected. From the first year, students engage in interdisciplinary core courses such as "Mind and Behaviour" or "Introduction to Critical Thinking", which explore topics like identity, decision-making, empathy, and mental health. Classroom discussions often include reflective writing, dialogue-based assessments, and mindfulness practices. Peer mentorship programs are formalized, and professors are encouraged to create emotionally safe spaces for discussion. Emotional learning isn't a supplement; it is part of the pedagogy. By normalizing emotional discourse and embedding it into academic life, Ashoka's model suggests that well-being need not compete with learning; it can enrich it.

6. Key Findings

The survey data, literature, and case studies yielded several key insights, many of which echoed what students have long felt but rarely had the chance to express within institutional settings. 78% of students reported that academic stress significantly affects their mental health.

This statistic underscores a crisis that is both widespread and normalized. Behind the numbers are real students grappling with insomnia, self-doubt, and emotional fatigue. 84% of students strongly wanted well-being to be part of the formal curriculum. Far from resisting change, students are actively demanding it. Many described emotional intelligence and mental health as essential life skills on par with technical and theoretical knowledge. While most faculty expressed concern for student well-being, they admitted they lacked the training and tools to support mental health effectively in academic settings. These findings suggest that while students strongly demand emotionally inclusive education, structural limitations

and a lack of faculty development remain major obstacles.

7. Recommendations

Building emotionally resilient learners requires demands systemic, actionable changes at every level of the academic experience. Based on the findings, this paper proposes the following key recommendations:

Integrate well-being into the curriculum

Universities should treat emotional education as core, not peripheral. Credit-bearing courses on emotional intelligence, stress management, and reflective practices should be mandated across disciplines just like math or communication skills.

Train faculty in emotional mentorship

Professors are often the first point of contact for distressed students, yet many feel ill-equipped to offer support. Regular faculty development workshops should include training in emotional literacy, mentoring techniques, and recognizing early signs of psychological distress.

Rethink assessment models

Current evaluation systems often reward rote performance over creativity or self-reflection. Assessments that incorporate group work, peer feedback, personal reflection, or creative expression should be valued meaningfully in grading systems.

Institutionalize well-being policies

Universities must move beyond ad-hoc solutions. Institutional policies should include well-being audits, dedicated mental health budgets, and performance indicators for emotional support services. Well-being should become a governance priority, not an extracurricular initiative.

8. Conclusion

The true aim of education must extend beyond the transfer of knowledge. It must include the overall development of individuals who are not only skilled but also self-aware, empathetic, and emotionally resilient. As demonstrated by institutions like IIT Delhi and Ashoka University, integrating well-being into higher education is not a utopian ideal; it is both necessary and achievable. While current efforts remain uneven and often fragmented, they point to a broader cultural shift already underway. The challenge now is to scale these efforts and embed them within the structures, syllabi, and values of higher education systems. If

the goal of education is to prepare young people not just for careers, but for life itself, then emotional well-being must no longer remain on the sidelines. It must be brought into the main stream as a central, measuarable, and intentional outcome of higher learning.

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