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## Student engagement and mental well-being in the next decade: With reference to higher education in India

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### Abstract

The rapid transformation of India's higher education ecosystem, driven by technology, globalization, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, demands renewed attention to student engagement and mental well-being. In the coming decade, as institutions increasingly adopt blended learning, AI-enabled instruction, and outcome-based curricula, the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of student life have become critical determinants of academic success and personal development. This paper examines the correlation between student engagement and mental well-being within Indian higher education, highlighting the importance of holistic institutional strategies that promote belonging, motivation, and psychological resilience among learners.

**Keywords:** Student Engagement, Mental Well-being, Higher Education, India

### Introduction

Higher education in India stands at a pivotal moment of change. The next decade will witness the convergence of technology, innovation, and inclusivity as central pillars of academic practice. Amidst this transformation, the human element—students' emotional and psychological connection to learning—remains vital. Student engagement is not merely participation in academic activities but a multifaceted construct encompassing cognitive investment, emotional involvement, and active participation in learning communities.

However, alongside increasing digitalization and competitiveness, mental health challenges among students have grown considerably. Studies by the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) indicate rising stress, anxiety, and burnout levels among college students. The relationship between engagement and well-being, therefore, becomes crucial: when students feel connected, supported, and meaningfully engaged, their mental health outcomes improve.

This paper explores how engagement strategies can enhance mental well-being in the Indian higher education context, identifying key objectives, reviewing relevant literature, and offering actionable suggestions for the decade ahead.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the significance of student engagement as a determinant of learning success and personal growth in Indian higher education institutions.
2. To analyze the relationship between student engagement and mental well-being, and explore institutional strategies that strengthen both dimensions.

### Review of Literature

#### 1. Student Engagement in Indian Higher Education

Student engagement has gained prominence as a critical indicator of institutional quality and learner satisfaction. According to Kuh (2003) <sup>[1]</sup>, engagement encompasses both the time and effort students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the institutional practices that promote participation. In India, initiatives such as Choice-Based Credit Systems (CBCS), experiential learning, and peer mentoring have been designed to enhance engagement. Yet, research by Rajeshwari and Thomas (2019) <sup>[2]</sup> reveals that many universities still face challenges in sustaining participatory learning cultures, particularly in large and heterogeneous classrooms.

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### Mental Well-being of Students: Emerging Concerns

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup> defines mental well-being as a state in which individuals realize their abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, and contribute to their community. In Indian universities, rising cases of stress, depression, and social isolation—particularly after the pandemic—have prompted UGC and NAAC to emphasize wellness initiatives. Singh and Arora (2021) <sup>[3]</sup> found that academic pressure, unemployment fears, and limited counseling access contribute significantly to mental health decline. The need for supportive and inclusive campus environments is thus paramount.

### Correlation between Engagement and Mental Well-being

Recent global and Indian studies suggest a strong positive correlation between student engagement and psychological well-being. George and Mathew (2022) <sup>[4]</sup> demonstrated that engaged students report higher satisfaction, motivation, and resilience. The sense of belonging fostered through active participation in academic and co-curricular spaces acts as a protective factor against anxiety and loneliness. Engagement not only enhances learning outcomes but also strengthens the social and emotional scaffolding essential for mental health.

### Observations

1. Student engagement directly influences emotional resilience, academic self-efficacy, and sense of purpose.
2. Institutions that adopt participatory pedagogies—peer learning, project-based learning, and mentoring—report improved mental health among students.
3. Mental well-being acts both as a cause and an effect of engagement: psychologically safe learners are more likely to engage deeply, and engagement, in turn, reinforces self-esteem and optimism.
4. Lack of meaningful engagement often leads to disengagement, absenteeism, and mental distress—issues increasingly visible in post-pandemic classrooms.

### Conclusion

In the next decade, Indian higher education must view student engagement and mental well-being not as parallel agendas but as interdependent priorities. A student-centered ecosystem that nurtures emotional connection, collaborative learning, and psychological safety will be central to sustainable educational excellence. The future university must blend academic rigor with empathetic care—recognizing that learning flourishes where well-being thrives.

### Suggestions

1. **Institutional Well-being Frameworks:** Establish dedicated student well-being centers integrated with academic advising and mentoring systems.
2. **Faculty Sensitization:** Train faculty to recognize early signs of distress and to adopt empathetic, inclusive pedagogies.
3. **Peer Engagement Programs:** Encourage peer mentoring, student clubs, and community outreach initiatives to build belonging.
4. **Curricular Innovation:** Integrate mental health literacy, mindfulness, and reflective practices within

curricula.

5. **Technology for Inclusion:** Use digital platforms for engagement tracking, counseling access, and community building.
6. **Policy Integration:** Align NEP 2020 recommendations with campus well-being metrics as part of NAAC assessment frameworks.

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