



Mental health infrastructure in Indian higher education institutions: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among students in Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) underscores the urgent need for a robust mental health infrastructure. This article examines the current state of mental health support systems, identifies key challenges—including stigma, inadequate resources, and policy gaps—and explores potential solutions. Drawing on empirical studies, government reports, and institutional case studies, the paper highlights best practices and recommends policy interventions to enhance mental health services in Indian HEIs. The findings emphasise the role of counselling centres, awareness programs, faculty training, and digital mental health solutions in fostering student well-being.

Keywords: Mental health, higher education, counselling services, student well-being, India, mental health policies

Introduction

Mental health has emerged as a critical concern in Indian higher education institutions (HEIs), with rising cases of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies among students (Reddy *et al.*, 2020) [6]. Academic pressure, financial constraints, social isolation, and career uncertainties contribute to deteriorating mental well-being. Despite growing awareness, many Indian HEIs lack structured mental health infrastructure, leading to inadequate support for students in distress.

This article evaluates the existing mental health frameworks in Indian universities and colleges, identifies systemic gaps, and proposes evidence-based recommendations for improvement. The study draws on peer-reviewed literature, government policies, and case studies to present a comprehensive analysis.

Current State of Mental Health Infrastructure in Indian HEIs

1. Counselling and Psychological Services

A few premier institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) have established counselling centres, but most universities and colleges lack professional mental health support (Chakraborty & Singh, 2021) [2]. Key observations include:

- **Limited Accessibility:** Only 20-30% of HEIs have full-time counsellors (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2019) [7].
- **Stigma and Underutilization:** Students often avoid seeking help due to fear of judgment (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2022) [1].
- **Shortage of Trained Professionals:** Many institutions rely on overburdened faculty or untrained staff for counselling.

2. Institutional Policies and Government Initiatives

- The UGC Guidelines on Student Mental Health (2016) mandate counselling services, but implementation remains weak.

- The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [4] emphasises mental health but lacks enforcement mechanisms.
- Some states (e.g., Kerala, Tamil Nadu) have introduced helplines and student wellness programs.

3. Digital and Peer Support Initiatives

- Online counselling platforms (e.g., iCall, YourDOST) are gaining traction.
- Peer-led mental health clubs and workshops are emerging in some colleges.

Key Challenges

1. Stigma and Lack of Awareness

Mental health remains a taboo topic, preventing students from seeking help (Pathare *et al.*, 2018) [5].

2. Inadequate Funding and Resources

Most HEIs allocate minimal budgets for mental health services (Ministry of Health, 2021) [3].

3. Absence of Standardised Protocols

No uniform guidelines exist for crisis intervention, suicide prevention, or long-term therapy.

4. High Student-to-Counsellor Ratio

The recommended ratio (1:1000) is rarely met, with some institutions reporting 1:5000 (NIMHANS, 2020).

Recommendations for Strengthening Mental Health Infrastructure

1. Policy and Institutional Reforms

- **Mandatory Mental Health Cells:** All HEIs should establish counselling centres with trained professionals.

- **Regular Mental Health Audits:** UGC and NAAC should include mental health in accreditation criteria.

2. Awareness and Training Programs

- **Anti-stigma campaigns:** Workshops, guest lectures, and student-led initiatives.
- **Faculty Training:** Sensitisation programs for teachers to identify at-risk students.

3. Digital Mental Health Solutions

- **AI-based Chatbots:** For preliminary mental health screenings.
- **Tele-counselling Services:** Expanding access in rural and semi-urban institutions.

4. Peer Support and Community Engagement

- **Student Wellness Clubs:** Encouraging peer counselling and support groups.
- **Collaboration with NGOs:** Partnerships with organisations like The Live Love Laugh Foundation.

Conclusion

Strengthening mental health infrastructure in Indian HEIs requires a multi-pronged approach involving policy enforcement, resource allocation, awareness campaigns, and technological integration. While progress has been made in elite institutions, systemic reforms are needed to ensure equitable access to mental health support across all universities and colleges. By prioritising student well-being, Indian HEIs can foster healthier academic environments and improve overall educational outcomes.

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