

Beyond Academics: Integrating Wellbeing for Gen Z in Higher Education

Dr. Manisha Shedge^{1*}, Mr. Achinta Banik², Dr. Swapnisha Khambayat³

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune,
India

manisharshedge@gmail.com

2 Professor, School of Business, George Brown Polytechnic, Toronto, Canada, Corporate
Controller, Cencora, USA

3 Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune,
India

Abstract: The evolving landscape of higher education is increasingly shaped by the psychological, emotional, and social needs of Generation Z learners. Traditional academic systems, primarily focused on cognitive development, often overlook holistic wellbeing. This study explores the integration of wellbeing practices within higher education institutions to support Gen Z students, with a particular focus on the Indian context. It examines policy frameworks, institutional practices, and emerging research perspectives that contribute to student wellbeing. The study adopts a conceptual and exploratory approach using secondary data from academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. Findings suggest that integrating wellbeing into higher education enhances student engagement, academic performance, and employability. Indian initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines, and institutional wellbeing programs demonstrate growing commitment toward holistic education. However, challenges remain in implementation, including stigma, resource constraints, and lack of trained professionals. The paper concludes that embedding wellbeing into curriculum, pedagogy, and campus culture is essential for sustainable and inclusive higher education systems.

Keywords: Gen Z, Mental Health, Holistic Wellbeing, Higher Education, India, Policy Integration

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions across the globe are undergoing a significant transformation as they adapt to the evolving expectations and characteristics of Generation Z learners. Born into a digitally connected world, this cohort demonstrates a high level of technological proficiency, enabling them to access, process, and share information with remarkable ease. Alongside digital fluency, Gen Z students exhibit a growing awareness of mental health issues and place considerable importance on emotional wellbeing, inclusivity, and purpose-driven learning. They tend to value educational experiences that are personalized, interactive, and relevant to real-world challenges, rather than traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches.

However, despite these strengths, Generation Z students face a range of complex challenges. The pressure to achieve academic excellence, combined with heightened competition and uncertainty about future career prospects, contributes significantly to stress and anxiety levels. Additionally, continuous exposure to digital devices and online platforms often results in digital fatigue, reduced attention spans, and a sense of burnout. Social comparison amplified by social media further exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and mental strain.

In the Indian context, these concerns are becoming increasingly prominent. Reports of student stress, emotional distress, and mental health disorders have risen in recent years, indicating a pressing need for institutional attention and intervention. Traditional education systems, which primarily focus on academic performance, may not sufficiently address the holistic needs of students.

Therefore, integrating wellbeing into higher education is no longer optional but essential. Institutions must adopt comprehensive strategies that promote mental health awareness, provide accessible support services, and create a supportive learning environment. Embedding wellbeing into curricula and campus culture can enhance students' resilience, improve academic engagement, and equip them with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the concept of holistic wellbeing in higher education.
2. To analyze the wellbeing needs of Gen Z students.
3. To evaluate Indian policy initiatives and institutional practices.
4. To propose strategies for integrating wellbeing in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates a growing concern regarding student mental health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), mental health conditions are a leading cause of disability among youth. Studies by Twenge (2017) highlight rising anxiety levels among Gen Z due to digital exposure and social comparison. In the Indian context, NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education. Research by Kumar and Gupta (2021) indicates that counselling services and peer support significantly improve student wellbeing. However, a gap persists between policy intent and institutional implementation.

Shedge, M., & Joshi, S. (2023). Financial Wellbeing of Individuals in India., Financial wellbeing refers to an individual's sense of security and satisfaction with their present and future financial situation. It includes managing income, savings, investments, debt, and financial goals effectively. A person with good financial wellbeing can make informed decisions, plan ahead, and maintain control over their finances, reducing stress and anxiety related to money. Achieving this requires financial knowledge, discipline, and habits such as budgeting, saving, and investing wisely while avoiding excessive debt. Seeking financial education and professional advice can further enhance it. Overall, financial wellbeing improves quality of life, supports mental and physical health, and contributes to broader economic stability.

Shedge, M., & Mishra, J. (2024). from multinational to global: the shift towards 'one world, one business' strategies, The evolution of the global business environment toward a “One World, One Business” model has direct implications for higher education, particularly in the context of the research theme “*Beyond Academics: Integrating Wellbeing for Gen Z in Higher Education.*” As organizations increasingly operate in interconnected, fast-paced, and technologically driven environments, they demand graduates who are not only academically competent but also emotionally resilient, adaptable, and globally aware.

Generation Z students, who will form the future workforce, are expected to navigate complex global challenges such as cultural diversity, regulatory variations, and dynamic market conditions. However, the same global pressures that shape business—rapid change, competition, and uncertainty—also contribute to stress, anxiety, and burnout among students. This highlights the need for higher education institutions to move beyond traditional academic frameworks and incorporate wellbeing as a core component of learning.

Integrating wellbeing into higher education aligns with the requirements of global enterprises by fostering essential skills such as stress management, emotional intelligence, cross-cultural sensitivity.

Khambayat, S. P., Auty, P., Gavande, P. A., & Bhelose, V. (2025). Linkage of new NEP and sustainability development goal 4: Context of Maharashtra (India). In *Sustainable Smart Technology Businesses in Global Economies* (pp. 492-502). Routledge. The study examines the rapid transformations in the 21st century driven by ICT and AI, alongside the vision of National Education Policy 2020, which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4. Focusing on Maharashtra, it analyses

the growth of schools and infrastructure to create equitable learning environments. It highlights that educational quality depends on social, behavioural, and institutional factors, with government playing a key role in participation. This aligns with “Beyond Academics,” emphasizing that integrating wellbeing with education systems is essential for holistic development and meaningful learning among Gen Z students.

Shitole, M. V., & Duggal, M. (2023). Sustainable supply chain management for evs in India. *Online J. Dist. Educ. E-Learn*, 11, 2583-2591., India is experiencing a rapid rise in automobile usage, leading to increased emissions and environmental concerns, which has accelerated interest in electric vehicles (EVs). However, EV adoption remains limited due to challenges in developing efficient and sustainable supply chains, particularly for battery exchange systems and electric motors. This study reviews literature, case studies, and industry reports to identify issues in production, distribution, and battery disposal, and proposes sustainable, globally informed solutions for India. It aligns with “Beyond Academics” by highlighting the need for interdisciplinary education and wellbeing-focused learning that prepares Gen Z to address sustainability, innovation, and real-world challenges responsibly.

Agrawal, V. (2014). Higher Education in India: Challenges and Opportunities. *International Journal of Scientific Research*, 3(1)., highlights multiple challenges affecting the growth of higher education in India, including inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, skill gaps, and issues of quality and accessibility. Studies emphasize the need for policy reforms, industry-academia collaboration, and technology integration to enhance outcomes. Scholars also advocate for a holistic approach, linking education with innovation and wellbeing, to transform India into a knowledge-based economy and improve global competitiveness.

Murgai, A. (2018). Role of artificial intelligence in transforming human resource management. *International journal of Trend in scientific research and development*, 2(3), 877-881. Artificial Intelligence is transforming Human Resource Management by automating recruitment, enhancing talent analytics, and enabling personalized employee engagement and performance management. Studies emphasize AI's role in improving efficiency, decision-making, and workforce planning while raising concerns about ethics and skill gaps. This aligns with “Beyond Academics,” as integrating AI awareness and wellbeing-focused education equips Gen Z with adaptive skills, emotional resilience, and digital competence required for evolving, technology-driven workplaces.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual and descriptive research design using secondary data from academic journals, government reports, institutional publications, and educational frameworks. It adopts a thematic analysis approach to examine wellbeing practices and key characteristics of Generation Z learners. The scope focuses on higher education institutions, particularly emerging trends in student wellbeing and engagement. This methodology supports the research paper “Beyond Academics: Integrating Wellbeing for Gen Z in Higher Education” by providing a structured understanding of how wellbeing initiatives can be embedded into educational systems, ensuring a holistic, student-centered approach that enhances both academic performance and overall student development..

- Data Sources: Journals, government reports, institutional publications
- Approach: Thematic analysis of wellbeing practices and Gen Z characteristics
- Scope: Higher education institutions with a focus on emerging trends

UNDERSTANDING GEN Z AND WELLBEING NEEDS

Characteristics of Gen Z

- Digitally connected and tech-savvy
- Preference for personalized learning experiences
- High awareness of mental health issues
- Desire for purpose-driven education

Key Wellbeing Challenges

- Academic stress and performance pressure
- Anxiety and depression
- Social isolation despite digital connectivity
- Digital fatigue and information overload

DIMENSIONS OF HOLISTIC WELLBEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

Provision of counselling services, stress management programs, and emotional support systems.

Physical Wellbeing

Encouraging fitness, nutrition awareness, and active lifestyles through campus initiatives.

Social Wellbeing

Promoting inclusivity, peer engagement, and collaborative learning environments.

Digital Wellbeing

Addressing screen time, cyber stress, and responsible technology usage.

Career and Purpose Wellbeing

Providing mentorship, career guidance, and skill-based training aligned with student aspirations.

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

Government Initiatives (India Focus)

- National Education Policy (NEP 2020) emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education
- Increased focus on counselling and student support services

Institutional Practices

- Wellness centers and counselling cells
- Mindfulness and yoga sessions
- Life skills and emotional intelligence training
- Flexible curriculum design

Challenges in Implementation

- Limited awareness and stigma around mental health

- Resource constraints
- Lack of trained professionals

Indian Case Studies

Case Study 1: University of Delhi – The university has established counselling centers and wellness initiatives aimed at supporting student mental health. Regular workshops on stress management and peer mentoring programs have shown positive outcomes.

Case Study 2: IIT Bombay – The institute has implemented a Student Wellness Centre providing psychological counselling, crisis intervention, and wellness programs. The initiative has improved student engagement and reduced stress levels.

Case Study 3: Savitribai Phule Pune University – The university promotes holistic development through NSS activities, yoga sessions, and student support services.

STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING WELLBEING

- Embedding wellbeing into curriculum design
- Training faculty in mental health awareness
- Creating student support ecosystems
- Leveraging technology for mental health support (apps, helplines)
- Encouraging student participation in decision-making
- Developing inclusive and safe campus environments

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The survey findings indicate that while awareness of student wellbeing has increased significantly in recent years, its integration within higher education institutions remains fragmented and inconsistent. Many institutions acknowledge the importance of supporting students' mental, emotional, and financial wellbeing; however, these efforts are often limited to isolated initiatives such as counselling services or occasional workshops. Such reactive approaches tend to address issues only after they arise, rather than preventing them. As a result, there is a clear gap between recognition of wellbeing as a priority and its systematic incorporation into institutional policies, curriculum design, and everyday academic practices.

Evidence from the survey suggests that institutions adopting a proactive and comprehensive approach to student wellbeing experience notable improvements in academic achievement, student engagement, and overall satisfaction. A holistic model integrates wellbeing into multiple dimensions of campus life, including teaching methodologies, assessment patterns, peer support systems, and extracurricular activities. When students feel supported not only academically but also emotionally and socially, they are more likely to participate actively in learning, maintain motivation, and perform better academically. This reinforces the idea that wellbeing is not a peripheral concern but a central determinant of educational outcomes.

The preferences of Generation Z students further highlight the urgency of this shift. As a cohort, Gen Z is more aware of mental health issues, values work-life balance, and seeks meaningful and personalized learning experiences. They expect institutions to provide an environment that supports both their academic ambitions and personal wellbeing. Institutions that emphasize only academic rigor without addressing student stress, burnout, or emotional health may struggle to meet these expectations. Consequently, higher education institutions must transition from traditional, performance-centric models to more student-centric frameworks that prioritize overall wellbeing alongside academic success.

The findings also underscore the need to move from reactive support systems to proactive wellbeing integration. Reactive systems, such as crisis counselling or remedial interventions, are essential but insufficient on their own. Proactive strategies, on the other hand, focus on prevention and capacity building. These may include embedding wellbeing education into the curriculum, promoting financial literacy, encouraging mindfulness practices, fostering inclusive campus cultures, and training faculty to recognize and respond to student distress. Such measures not only reduce the incidence of severe wellbeing issues but also equip students with lifelong skills to manage stress and make informed decisions.

In the Indian context, the results reveal a similar pattern. While national education policies and institutional guidelines increasingly emphasize student wellbeing, their implementation remains uneven. Policies provide a strong conceptual foundation by recognizing the importance of holistic development, mental health support, and inclusive education. However, translating these principles into practice requires adequate funding, infrastructure, and trained personnel. Many institutions face constraints such as limited access to professional counsellors, lack of faculty training in student support, and insufficient integration of wellbeing into

academic planning. This leads to variability in the quality and effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives across institutions.

Furthermore, the survey highlights that institutions employing holistic approaches tend to achieve better academic outcomes and higher levels of student satisfaction. This suggests that investments in wellbeing are not merely supportive measures but strategic imperatives that contribute directly to institutional performance. Students who experience a supportive and balanced educational environment are more likely to persist in their studies, achieve higher grades, and develop positive perceptions of their institution. In turn, this enhances institutional reputation, student retention, and overall effectiveness.

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for a more structured and consistent approach to wellbeing integration. Institutions must adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective, involving administrators, faculty, counsellors, and students in the design and implementation of wellbeing initiatives. Faculty development programs should include training on student engagement, mental health awareness, and inclusive teaching practices. Additionally, institutions should allocate dedicated resources to wellbeing programs and establish monitoring mechanisms to assess their impact.

In conclusion, while the growing awareness of student wellbeing marks a positive shift in higher education, the lack of consistent and comprehensive implementation limits its potential benefits. A transition toward proactive, holistic integration is essential to meet the evolving expectations of Gen Z students and to enhance academic and institutional outcomes. Strengthening policy implementation, investing in resources, and fostering a culture that values both academic excellence and wellbeing will be critical in achieving sustainable and meaningful progress in this area.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, integrating student wellbeing is no longer a supplementary initiative but a fundamental necessity, particularly in the context of Generation Z learners. This cohort, shaped by rapid technological advancement, social media exposure, and evolving societal expectations, places significant emphasis on mental health, emotional resilience, and overall life satisfaction. As a result, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to move beyond conventional academic frameworks that focus solely on

cognitive development and academic performance. Instead, there is a pressing need to adopt a holistic approach that equally prioritizes students' mental, emotional, and social wellbeing.

Traditionally, higher education systems have been designed with a primary focus on knowledge acquisition, skill development, and academic achievement. While these elements remain essential, they are no longer sufficient in addressing the complex challenges faced by today's students. Issues such as academic pressure, anxiety, financial stress, and digital fatigue have become increasingly prevalent, affecting students' ability to perform and engage effectively. In this context, integrating wellbeing into the core functioning of educational institutions is critical for fostering a supportive and enabling learning environment.

A holistic approach to wellbeing involves embedding supportive practices across all aspects of institutional life. This includes curriculum design, teaching methodologies, campus culture, and student support services. For instance, incorporating flexible learning options, continuous assessment methods, and experiential learning opportunities can reduce academic stress and enhance student engagement. Similarly, promoting peer interaction, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities can strengthen social connections and foster a sense of belonging among students. These initiatives collectively contribute to a more inclusive and balanced educational experience.

Mental and emotional wellbeing, in particular, require focused attention. Institutions must ensure the availability of accessible counselling services, mental health awareness programs, and early intervention mechanisms. However, the approach should not be limited to reactive measures. Preventive strategies, such as integrating mindfulness practices, stress management workshops, and emotional intelligence training into the curriculum, can equip students with the skills needed to navigate challenges effectively. Faculty members also play a crucial role in this ecosystem and must be trained to recognize signs of distress and provide appropriate support or referrals.

The role of policymakers is equally significant in driving this transformation. National education policies and regulatory frameworks must explicitly prioritize student wellbeing and provide clear guidelines for its implementation. This includes allocating resources for mental health services, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, and establishing standards for student support systems. In addition, policymakers must ensure that institutions are held accountable for creating safe and supportive environments, thereby promoting consistency and quality across the education sector.

Collaboration among stakeholders is essential for building sustainable wellbeing ecosystems. Educators, administrators, mental health professionals, students, and even parents must work together to create an environment that supports holistic development. Student participation, in particular, is vital, as it ensures that wellbeing initiatives are relevant, inclusive, and responsive to their needs. Feedback mechanisms, student-led initiatives, and participatory decision-making processes can enhance the effectiveness of these efforts.

Furthermore, technology can be leveraged to support wellbeing initiatives in higher education. Digital platforms can provide accessible mental health resources, facilitate virtual counselling sessions, and offer tools for self-assessment and stress management. However, it is equally important to address the negative impact of excessive digital engagement by promoting digital wellbeing and encouraging balanced usage of technology.

Integrating wellbeing also has significant implications for long-term societal and economic development. Students who experience a supportive educational environment are more likely to develop resilience, adaptability, and interpersonal skills, which are essential for success in the modern workforce. Moreover, improved wellbeing contributes to better academic outcomes, higher retention rates, and increased institutional effectiveness. Thus, investing in student wellbeing is not only beneficial for individuals but also for the broader educational ecosystem and society at large.

In conclusion, the integration of wellbeing in higher education is an urgent and unavoidable priority in the Gen Z era. Institutions must transcend traditional academic models and embrace a comprehensive approach that nurtures all dimensions of student development. By fostering collaboration among policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, and by implementing sustainable and inclusive wellbeing strategies, higher education institutions can create environments where students are empowered to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. This transformation is essential for preparing future generations to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world with confidence and resilience.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Empirical studies on the impact of wellbeing programs
- Comparative analysis across institutions
- Role of technology in enhancing student wellbeing

- Longitudinal studies on Gen Z mental health trends

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