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STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AS A PILLAR OF SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION: A SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES

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1. Abstract
While environmental and economic factors usually dominate the discussion on sustainable higher education, the psychological resilience of the student population is equally critical to institutional longevity. This study explores how student mental health serves as a foundational pillar for sustainable universities in India. By analyzing secondary data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022-23, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics, and recent epidemiological research, the paper highlights a deepening crisis within the Indian academic ecosystem. Findings reveal that while university enrollment has reached 4.46 crore, student suicides are rising at an annual rate of 4%—double that of the general population. The study identifies a significant 83% treatment gap and emphasizes that academic engagement acts as a crucial mediator between institutional support and well-being. The paper concludes that for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 4, they must move beyond ad-hoc counseling and integrate "Social and Emotional Capital" into their core governance and sustainability strategies.

2. Keywords
Student Mental Health, Sustainable Higher Education, Student Well-being, SDG 3, University Sustainability, Educational Well-being.

3. Introduction
The long-term viability of higher education is increasingly judged by its impact on human development. In India, which manages one of the largest tertiary education systems globally, the sustainability of this vast human capital is under pressure. The latest AISHE 2022-23 census shows that the student population has surpassed 4.46 crore, spread across 60,380 institutions. However, this quantitative expansion has often come at the expense of qualitative well-being. The prevailing "exam-centric" culture in Indian universities creates a high-stakes environment that frequently compromises the mental health of learners. As the World Health Organization (WHO) observes, mental health is not merely the absence of disease but a functional state of well-being that allows individuals to learn productively and contribute to their communities.

Statistics indicate that India is at a crossroads regarding student welfare. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports from 2022 and 2023 show that student suicides have surged significantly, accounting for approximately 13,044 deaths in a single year nearly 7.6% of all suicides in the country. Even more concerning is the 5.68% increase in child suicides (under

18) documented in 2023. These tragedies are often linked to academic failure, social isolation, and financial insecurity, which act as primary inhibitors of sustainable human capital development.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges these "rigid boundaries" and the lack of adequate psychological support within the current system. Despite policy intentions, a persistent treatment gap exists; approximately 83% of Indian students who require mental health care do not receive it. This research gap where mental health is viewed as a peripheral welfare issue rather than a strategic pillar of university sustainability is the focus of this paper. By analysing these trends, this study provides a roadmap for aligning Indian HEIs with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ensuring that "Social and Emotional Capital" is recognized as a measurable component of national wealth.

4. Literature Review

Academic discourse on university sustainability has transitioned from simple "campus greening" to a "whole-institution approach". Contemporary models generally focus on four pillars: Education, Research, Operations, and External Leadership. However, the human dimension of these pillars is frequently overlooked. Human capital constitutes roughly 60% of most nations' inclusive wealth, and this capital cannot be maintained if the psychological health of the youth is neglected.

Studies in Indian HEIs highlight a "treatment gap" driven by cultural stigma and infrastructure deficits. While 75% of mental disorders manifest by the age of 24, university systems often prioritize clinical diagnosis over early detection. Research involving management students in India found that "academic engagement" fully mediates the link between institutional support and well-being. This suggests that support systems are only effective if they maintain the student's cognitive and emotional connection to their studies.

The link between psychological health and academic success is well-documented but complex. While some studies suggest no direct link to raw grades, there is a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.864$) between mental well-being and "learning motivation". Conversely, high levels of chronic stress and anxiety impair memory and problem-solving skills, leading to higher dropout rates. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report emphasizes that inclusive education must account for the emotional readiness of learners to prevent disengagement and attrition.

Institutional responses in India are evolving but remain inconsistent. While premier institutions like the IITs have drafted comprehensive policies through initiatives like SAHYOG 2.0, many state-run colleges lack the funding or personnel to implement uniform standards. This review identifies a critical need to bridge the "implementation disconnect" and reposition mental health as a proactive sustainability metric rather than a reactive medical service.

5. Linking Mental Health with Sustainable Development Goals

Integrating student well-being into university strategy is a global mandate under the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Target 3.4 specifically calls for a one-third reduction in premature mortality from non-communicable diseases and the promotion of mental health. HEIs are ideal platforms for this goal, as they can embed psychological support into their everyday operations, fostering a

"Human Development" model that goes beyond economic growth to expand individual capabilities.

SDG 4: Quality Education

Target 4.3 aims for equal and affordable access to quality education. Mental health issues serve as significant "non-physical barriers" to this goal. Since over 80% of students in some cohorts report that emotional distress harms their academic performance, achieving "Quality Education" is impossible without addressing these psychological hurdles. Furthermore, prioritizing well-being contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by supporting marginalized groups who face higher risks of distress.

6. Research Objectives

1. To track year-on-year trends in student mental health issues and suicide rates in India (2018-2024) using NCRB and AISHE data.
2. To examine the role of university-led interventions, such as Student Services Centres (SSCs), in fostering a sustainable learning environment.
3. To analyse the correlation between psychological well-being and institutional outcomes like academic retention and student engagement.
4. To establish student mental health as a core dimension of university sustainability in alignment with the UN 2030 Agenda.

7. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Student Mental Health and Sustainable Higher Education

The framework operates through three stages:

- **Stage 1: Inputs (Mental Health Factors):** Includes stressors like academic pressure, financial instability, and digital obsession, alongside environmental factors like campus green spaces.
- **Stage 2: Mediators (Well-being & Engagement):** Psychological Capital (PsyCap) hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism mediates the impact of support systems on performance.
- **Stage 3: Results (Sustainable Outcomes):** Measured by improved retention, human capital growth, and the fulfilment of SDG targets.

This cycle suggests that a "socially responsible" university climate acts as a contextual resource, reducing the "loss pressures" of academic life and enhancing the "gain opportunities" for student growth.

8. Research Methodology

This research utilizes a descriptive and analytical design based on secondary data synthesis.

Data Sources

- **AISHE 2022-23:** Used for enrolment data and institutional growth metrics.
- **NCRB (ADSI) Reports:** Used for tracking student suicide statistics and causes.
- **National Mental Health Survey (NMHS):** Used for prevalence estimates of disorders.
- **UGC Policy Guidelines (2023):** Evaluated for implementation standards of SSCs.

Analysis Techniques

- **Trend Analysis:** Identifying patterns in student suicide rates vs. general population growth.
- **Correlation Analysis:** Interpreting regional distress levels (e.g., Kashmir vs. Guwahati) from existing studies.
- **Content Analysis:** Assessing the gap between the mandates of NEP 2020 and institutional reality.

Secondary data analysis is preferred because it allows for a macro-level evaluation of India's 4.3 crore students, providing a statistically sound basis for national policy recommendations.

9. Findings

1. High Prevalence of Psychological Morbidity

Secondary data reveals widespread distress. A survey of 1,628 students in eight major Indian cities found that 69.9% experienced moderate to high anxiety, and 59.9% reported significant depression. Regional data from Kashmir (2024) indicates a severe depression prevalence of 12.5%, with a strong correlation ($r = 0.8064$) between depression and anxiety. In Guwahati, anxiety symptoms were reported by 86% of the student population.

2. Rising Suicide Trends among Students

NCRB data confirms that student suicides remain a crisis. In 2022, student suicides reached 13,044 deaths, or 7.6% of the national total. Over the past decade, student suicide rates have grown by 4% annually—twice the growth rate of total population suicides. Notably, suicides among those under 18 rose by 5.68% in 2023.

3. Service Barriers and the Treatment Gap

Despite high distress, service utilization is low. There is a documented 83% treatment gap for mental health in India. Only 16.4% of students with diagnosable conditions received treatment in a 12-month period. Barriers include a lack of private counseling rooms in one-third of institutions and persistent stigma.

4. Correlation with Academic Sustainability

Mental health is a primary driver of retention. Research indicates a positive correlation ($r = 0.648$) between mental health levels and academic achievement. Chronic stress and burnout are identified as top predictors of dropout intentions in Indian universities.

10. Data Analysis and Discussion

The results suggest that India's higher education system is at a critical threshold. The "exam-centric" nature of the system is reflected in the suicide data, where academic failure is a leading reported trigger. Discrepancies between enrollment growth (now 4.46 crore) and stagnant mental health infrastructure create an unsustainable environment. While the UGC's mandate for Student Services Centres (SSCs) is a significant policy move, its impact is limited by resource strain and inconsistent implementation. Proactive models, such as the Kerala JEEVANI program or IIT Roorkee's SAHYOG 2.0, provide scalable examples of how to bridge the access gap by integrating well-being into the institutional culture.

11. Implications for Sustainable Higher Education

- **Infrastructure Strengthening:** HEIs must prioritize dedicated, confidential counselling spaces and maintain a reasonable counsellor-to-student ratio.

- **Strategic Integration:** Well-being must be mainstreamed into the credit system, as suggested by the UGC for physical activities, to incentivize healthy behaviours.
- **Technology Adoption:** Digital tools like mHealth apps and 24/7 helplines (e.g., Tele-MANAS, MANAS-SETU) offer scalable first-line support.
- **Curricular Reform:** Moving toward holistic assessment models can reduce the primary stressors of high-stakes testing.

12. Conclusion

This analysis underscores that student mental health is a fragile but essential pillar of sustainable higher education in India. With student suicide rates rising twice as fast as the general population and a staggering 83% treatment gap, the nation's human capital is at risk. For HEIs to achieve the mandates of SDG 3 and 4, they must transition from reactive counselling to a proactive "whole-institution" model. Safeguarding the potential of 4.46 crore students requires recognizing psychological resilience not as an optional service, but as a core requirement for a sustainable future.

13. Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation is the reliance on secondary data, which may involve reporting lags and under-reporting due to social stigma. There is also a lack of data regarding the informal coaching sector, which contributes significantly to student stress in India.

14. Future Research Directions

Future studies should use longitudinal primary data to track cohorts through high-stress transitions, such as placement seasons. Research using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could further quantify the impact of specific well-being interventions on long-term academic retention.

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