



Wellbeing Matters: Exploring Levels and Demographic Differences Among Higher Education Students

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Abstract

During the implementation phase of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which prioritizes the holistic development of students, understanding and enhancing student wellbeing is essential, particularly considering the academic pressures, cultural influences, and socio-economic factors unique to each region. This study aims to explore the overall level of student wellbeing and to examine differences across demographic groups, including age, gender, residential background, and qualification level, among students in higher education institutions in Haryana, India. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among students enrolled in various higher education institutions across Haryana. Data were collected from 454 participants using a self-constructed Student Wellbeing Questionnaire, administered through both online (Google Forms) and offline (paper-based) formats, utilizing a convenience sampling method. The data were analysed using SPSS version 26, applying both descriptive and comparative statistical methods. The results revealed statistically significant differences in student wellbeing scores based on gender and qualification level, with male and postgraduate students reporting higher levels of wellbeing compared to female and undergraduate students, respectively. The finding of the study highlights the importance of recognizing region-specific cultural and social dynamics in developing effective local, regional, and national initiatives, particularly for planning interventions and formulating educational policies to address prevailing academic concerns such as student wellbeing.



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Introduction

The concept of well-being represents a significant focus area within the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 and is also a primary concern for the World Health Organization. Well-being can be understood as a multifaceted concept comprising meaningfulness, positive emotions, positive functioning, fulfilment, and satisfaction with life across various dimensions such as physical, academic, social, and psychological well-being.

The World Health Organization conducted an international survey involving 13,984 participants from eight countries, which revealed that one-third of first-year college students reported experiencing a mental health disorder (Auerbach *et al.*, 2018). Further highlighting this growing concern, a 2020 survey by the Insight Network involving students from 10 universities revealed that one in five students had a current mental health diagnosis, and nearly half had faced a serious psychological issue requiring professional support, a significant rise from the one in three students who reported similar challenges in the 2018 edition of the same survey (Pereira *et al.*, 2019). Adding to these concerns, recent studies highlight the significant impact of the shift in learning modalities because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2023; Xu & Huang, 2022). This transition has not only aggravated pre-existing stressors but also intensified psychological distress among students, evidenced by feelings of uncertainty, panic, and fear, increased social isolation, and growing anxiety about academic progress and future career prospects, all of which have collectively disrupted their overall well-being (Liu *et al.*, 2021). These findings collectively highlight the growing prevalence of mental health issues among young adults within academic settings, both before and after the pandemic. In response to these global concerns, the new Indian National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has introduced a significant reorientation of the contemporary educational framework, emphasizing the holistic well-being of students as a fundamental aspect of the academic paradigm. This transformative shift underscores the critical importance of prioritizing mental health within the educational system, aligning with the global acknowledgment of its pivotal role in encouraging students' overall progress (Frazier & Doyle Fosco, 2024; Hossain *et al.*, 2022).

The promotion of well-being among students has consequently become a crucial educational agenda worldwide, particularly in light of the increased vulnerability to mental health challenges experienced by university students (Bantjes *et al.*, 2023; Ebert *et al.*, 2019; Kavvasdas *et al.*, 2023; Lai *et al.*, 2024.) This susceptibility is primarily attributed to various factors associated with the transition to university life, including being distanced from one's family support systems, separation from loved ones, academic pressures, and the need to establish new social connections. Additionally, the adoption of unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as increased alcohol consumption and exposure to illicit substances, further exacerbates these difficulties (Ajagallay *et al.*, 2020; Rajguru & Srivastava, 2020; Rathakrishnan *et al.*, 2022). Research indicates that factors such as low academic achievement, academic stress, social isolation, suicide ideation, loneliness, sense of distress, performance pressure, family conflict, economic burden, emotional strain of living away from family, and difficulty adjusting to a new environment can contribute to diminished well-being among students (Chadda, 2018; Keshoofy *et al.*, 2023; Slimmen *et al.*, 2022; Thaivalappil *et al.*, 2023; Ts *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, studies highlight that students possessing a heightened sense of well-being exhibit a tendency toward superior academic performance both within educational settings and in subsequent stages of their lives (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2022; Price & McCallum, 2015). This enhanced academic achievement not only benefits the individual students but also has broader positive implications for society. As such individuals are more likely to secure employment, actively participate in social engagements, and make significant contributions to the advancement and prosperity of their nation.

A study on university students (Gustavson *et al.*, 2018) reveals that there is a higher prevalence of mental health disorders among individuals in their twenties compared to those in their thirties or forties. This is particularly concerning for India, which as per the 2011 Census, is recognized for its significant youth demographic, and confronts an urgent need to tackle mental health issues among its young populace. Aligning with this concern, the WHO's Mental Health Action Plan for 2013–2020 promotes for comprehensive mental health care

and social support through community-based interventions (Saxena *et al.*, 2014). However, there remains a significant gap between the prevalence of mental disorders and the availability of mental health services. In response to these challenges, the current survey investigates the well-being of university students in institutions within the Haryana region, India. It aims to quantitatively assess the level of student well-being levels among Indian youth enrolled in higher education institutions in Haryana region and to explore demographic differences in well-being scores. The importance of this study is underscored by the stigma surrounding mental health problems among college students, as highlighted by prior studies (Abuhamdah & Naser, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Ahuja *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the relevance of initiatives like the NEP 2020 is emphasized by this disparity, reinforcing the necessity of empirical studies that examine student well-being across diverse demographic groups. This research holds significant implications for guiding the formulation of effective interventions and policies. Identifying varying levels of student well-being and recognizing notable demographic distinctions are essential steps in facilitating the adoption of interventions that yield meaningful benefits.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to assess the well-being of students enrolled in government higher education institutions in Haryana.

Participants and Procedure

For the purpose of this study, data were collected from various government higher education institutions in Haryana, namely the Central University of Haryana, Maharshi Dayanand University, Kurukshetra University, and Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology. The survey was conducted using convenience sampling and administered through both online (Google Forms) and offline (paper-based) formats. It was distributed among 600 students aged between 17 and 25 years, from which a total of 454 complete responses were received from the aforementioned institutions in Haryana. The participants were enrolled in a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and represented both rural and urban residential backgrounds. Undergraduate students pursued

degrees such as Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.), Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), and Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech.). The postgraduate group included students enrolled in Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.Sc.), Master of Pharmacy (M.Pharm.), Master of Computer Applications (MCA), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Technology (M.Tech.), Master of Social Work (MSW), and the integrated Master of Arts and Bachelor of Laws (M.A. LL.B.) programs.

Participants were included in the study if they had completed at least one semester of regular study at their university or college, possessed proficiency in reading and understanding English, and had no history of mental health disorders in the past six months. Students who did not meet these criteria were excluded. The survey was conducted from February to March 2025, and questionnaires were distributed via social media platforms and in person, using both online (Google Forms) and paper-based methods. Only students currently enrolled in regular undergraduate or higher degree programs within the age group of 17 to 25 years were considered. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and strict confidentiality of respondents was maintained.

The selection criteria were based on the assumption that students at the graduating level or above are more prone to experiencing stress and anxiety due to various concerns, such as challenges related to future career aspirations, family expectations, transitions in the education process (from traditional to digital modes, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic), peer pressure, and financial worries. Demographic information such as age, gender, residential background, and qualification level was collected.

Measures Used

The study employed a self-constructed 9-item Student Well-Being Scale to assess the well-being of students. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived well-being. Sample items included: "I enjoy acquiring knowledge about the subject I chose" (academic well-being) and "I feel energetic

during the work hours" (physical well-being). The scale showed satisfactory psychometric properties with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.76.

Convergent validity was established through a significant moderate correlation ($r = 0.557$) with the Psychological Well-Being Scale by Ryff and Keyes (1995). Initially, 30 statements were compiled and evaluated by experts in English and Psychology for clarity and relevance. Based on expert feedback, ambiguous or redundant items were removed, and 20 items with adequate face and content validity were selected. These were then administered to 350 university students for item analysis. Items with item-total correlations below 0.30 were excluded, resulting in a final 9-item scale. The internal consistency of the final scale was reconfirmed, and to establish construct validity and norms, it was administered alongside 18 items from the Ryff and Keyes scale to a separate sample of 200 students.

Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS Version 26.0, employing both descriptive statistics (frequencies, range, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-tests) to meet the study objectives and analyse the collected data effectively.

Results

The primary objectives of the present study were to examine demographic differences in overall student well-being scores and to explore the level of well-being among students enrolled in higher educational institutions of Haryana state. To achieve these objectives, a self-constructed questionnaire was administered to a sample of 454 students, comprising 195 males and 259 females. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyse the data, and the following sections present and discuss the findings. The socio-demographic details of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants included in the Study (N = 454)

Characteristics	Categories	N (%) / mean $\pm$ SD
Gender	Male	195 (43.0)
	Female	259 (57.0)
Age	Range:	21.78 $\pm$ 1.97
	17-21	216 (47.6)
	22-25	238 (52.4)
Residential Background	Urban	240 (52.9)
	Rural	214 (47.1)
Qualification Level	Undergraduate	311 (68.5)
	Postgraduate	143 (31.5)

The study sample comprised 454 participants, with 43% ($n = 195$) males and 57% ($n = 259$) females, aged between 17 and 25 years ($M = 21.78$, $SD = 1.97$). Of these participants, 47.6% ($n = 216$) were in the 17–21 age group, while 52.4% ($n = 238$) were aged 22–25 years. In terms of residential background, 52.9% ($n = 240$) were from urban areas and 47.1% ($n = 214$) from rural areas. Regarding educational background, 68.5% ($n = 311$) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, while 31.5% ($n = 143$) were pursuing postgraduate studies.

Independent-samples t-tests were employed to examine differences in students' wellbeing scores based on their demographic characteristics

(Table 2). Significant mean differences were found for gender ($t(452) = 2.28$, $p < .01$) and educational qualification ($t(452) = 1.78$, $p < .05$). Findings indicated that male students reported significantly higher wellbeing scores ($M = 33.76$, $SD = 5.92$) compared to female students ($M = 32.63$, $SD = 4.67$). Furthermore, postgraduate students exhibited significantly higher overall wellbeing scores ($M = 33.77$, $SD = 4.63$) than undergraduate students ($M = 32.82$, $SD = 5.53$).

Based on the established norms of the scale, the study also revealed that a substantial majority (64.8%) of participants reported high levels of wellbeing. This group included 32.2% in the "High"

category and 32.6% in the "Very High" category. In contrast, only a minimal proportion of participants reported low levels of wellbeing, with 0.2% falling into the "Very Low" category and 0.9% into the

"Low" category (Table 3). These findings suggest a generally positive perception of well-being among the study participants, with limited representation at the lower end of the spectrum.

Table 2: Combined t-test result table comparing Student Wellbeing based on Demographics (N=454)

Variable	Demographics	n	Mean	SD	df	t-ratio	p-value
Student Wellbeing	Male	195	33.76	5.92	452	2.28**	0.01
	Female	259	32.63	4.67			
	17-21 yrs	216	32.51	5.25	452	2.38	0.87
	22-25 yrs	238	33.68	5.24			
	Urban	240	33.54	4.99	452	1.81	0.22
	Rural	214	32.65	5.54			
	Undergraduate	311	32.82	5.53	452	1.78*	0.05
	Postgraduate	143	33.77	4.63			

**significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed) *significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 3: Distribution of Participant Wellbeing Levels in the Study Sample (N=454)

Level of Student Wellbeing	n (%)
Very Low	1 (0.2)
Low	4 (0.9)
Below Moderate	13 (2.9)
Moderate	41 (9.0)
Above Moderate	101 (22.2)
High	146 (32.2)
Very High	148 (32.6)
Total Mean (SD)	33.12 (± 5.27)

Discussion

The observed gender differences in students' wellbeing may be attributed to the fact that the tendency of females to be more emotionally reactive and are generally more vulnerable to stressful life events. Research suggests that women are more likely to experience higher perceived stress levels and are at greater risk for developing mental health disorders than men (Maslakçı & Sürücü, 2022; Graves *et al.*, 2021). Hodes *et al.* (2023), in their comprehensive review, also found that females exhibit greater vulnerability to mental health symptoms. They highlighted both biological mechanisms and psychological factors, such as heightened hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA)

axis reactivity and differential coping mechanism, which contribute to gender-based differences in stress response.

Previous studies conducted in the Indian context have also examined gender differences in the well-being of young adults, though findings have been mixed. For instance, Negi *et al.* (2019) reported lower levels of well-being among female university students, who experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to males. Their study also identified key stressors such as academic pressure, financial difficulties, health concerns, uncertainty about the future, lack of structured daily routines, unhealthy relationships with family and

faculty, limited engagement in physical activities, excessive time spent on digital devices, and high parental expectations. Similarly, studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in India reported a significant decline in students' mental health and revealed a comparable trend, with females experiencing greater mental health challenges than their male counterparts (Bhakat & Das, 2023; Chhetri *et al.*, 2021; Mishra *et al.*, 2021).

Other studies, however, suggest a more balanced state of well-being across genders. Mahato and Das (2024) and Singhal and Prakash (2020) found no significant gender differences in well-being among college and university students, attributing this to improved access to educational opportunities and resources for both males and females. In contrast, Johri and Anand (2022), in their study on young adults residing in urban areas of India, observed higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction among urban women, which they linked to the progressive and supportive environments prevalent in urban settings.

Regarding educational qualification, the higher wellbeing scores among postgraduate students may suggest that a higher level of education may be associated with more rational and problem focused coping strategies, greater emotional maturity, and a clearer sense of academic and career direction. These factors are often associated with increased psychological resilience and stability, which are positively associated with overall wellbeing (Yang *et al.*, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2021). Although higher education may not directly impact individual's wellbeing, it can provide access to desirable resources and opportunities for improved income, which in turn may enhance overall life satisfaction (Jiang, 2019).

Conclusion

The findings of the present study conclude that 32.6% of the 454 participants from different higher education institutes in Haryana, India, exhibited a very high level of student well-being, while 0.2% displayed a very low level of student well-being. The results from the t-tests revealed a significant difference in student well-being based

on demographic variables—gender and qualification level. Specifically, male students reported higher levels of student well-being than female students. Similarly, postgraduate students reported better well-being than undergraduate. There was no significant difference in the level of well-being based on students' residential backgrounds, whether they were from urban or rural areas, or across different age groups.

Research Limitations & Implications

Understanding the limitations of the present study is crucial for interpreting the findings and planning future research in this domain. The participants included in this study were English-speaking students from various Higher education institutes in Haryana, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Indian university students, who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the research focused exclusively on students from Haryana, highlighting the need for further research to explore potential subcultural disparities among students from different regions across India. Furthermore, the use of a single questionnaire in the survey restricts the understanding of the underlying causes and correlates of student well-being. Lastly, the study assessed only the level of student well-being without considering other relevant factors that may contribute to it. Despite these limitations, the findings could inform the development of suitable mental health interventions for college and university students in India, enhancing mental health awareness efforts and facilitating culturally and contextually relevant interventions in higher education institutions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

This research was conducted with the informed consent of all participants, who were assured that their identities and responses would remain confidential and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The privacy rights of all human subjects were strictly observed and protected throughout the research process.

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Author Contributions

- **Ritu Sharma:** Visualization, Supervision, Research Administration
- **Pramjeet Singh:** Data Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing.
- **Arti Kaushik:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data collection, Writing – Original Draft.

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