



National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Student Well-Being in Higher Education: A Qualitative Policy and Document Analysis

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Abstract

Student well-being has emerged as an important concern in higher education policy, encompassing mental, emotional, psychosocial, social, and academic dimensions of student development. This study critically examines the conceptualization and policy provisions on student well-being in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and identifies the institutional and implementation conditions required for its operationalization. The study adopts a qualitative policy and document-analysis approach based on a purposively selected body of national policy documents, official reports, and relevant peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2026. The analysis followed a macro-meso-micro policy-institution-student well-being framework, linking national policy commitments with institutional processes and documented student-level concerns. The results indicate a comprehensive vision of NEP 2020 for student development, with provisions for multidisciplinary study, inclusion, flexible learning, counseling, student support, and life skills development. Many implementation challenges remain, especially around measurable indicators of well-being, institutional responsibility, consistent support systems, professional capacity, and implementation guidance across higher education settings. The analysis suggests policy commitments cannot be directly translated into students' support and must be mediated by institutions, supported by resources, available services, and systems of monitoring and accountability. The study contributes a policy-oriented analytical perspective by clarifying the relationship between policy commitment, institutional operationalization, and student well-being. Given its documentary design, it does not measure the causal or actual effects of NEP 2020 on student well-being; rather, it identifies the policy and institutional conditions that require attention for its well-being commitments to be effectively translated into practice.

Keywords: *Student Well-Being, NEP 2020, Higher Education, Mental Health, Policy Implementation, Higher Education Policy, Macro-Meso-Micro Framework*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, more than one billion people, nearly one in eight, live with a mental health condition, with around half of mental disorders beginning before the age of 14 (WHO, 2025). Mental health is a fundamental component of well-being and is influenced by individual, social, environmental, and structural factors (GoI, 2017). There remains a significant treatment gap, inequality, and under-resourced systems, which still restrict access to timely, appropriate mental health care and emphasize the need for accessible, preventive, and community-based mental health support (WHO, 2021, 2022).

Student well-being has emerged as an important concern in higher education and includes mental, emotional, psychological, social, and academic aspects. University-going students face pressures of their studies, social adaptation, loss of support systems, and other factors that affect their well-being (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020).

Growing research on student mental health has consequently shifted attention beyond individual difficulties toward the institutional environments and support systems within which students study and seek assistance. All these developments have reinforced the argument that the issue of students' well-being is not only their personal mental health issue, but also an institutional and policy challenge within the system of higher education.

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Conceptual Foundations of Student Well-Being in Higher Education

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that encompasses more than the absence of mental illness; it also includes psychological functioning, social connectedness, belonging, resilience, and meaningful engagement in academic and social activities ([Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020](#)). Its development is therefore influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by academic, social, and institutional conditions.

This vision aligns with the holistic approach of NEP 2020, focusing on students' intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral development. The Policy also highlights supportive systems for different student populations as a foundation for analyzing well-being in relation to the policy and institutional (PI) conditions that influence students' educational journeys ([NEP, 2020](#)).

Global and National Policy Attention to Student Well-Being in Education

Attention to mental health concerns in education and public health has steadily increased, along with attention to inclusive and supportive learning environments ([GoI, 2017](#)). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) link health, well-being, quality education, and inclusion/human development, and are particularly pertinent to SDG 3 and SDG 4 ([Bernstein, 2025](#); [United Nations General Assembly, 2015](#)).

[UNESCO \(2021a, 2021b\)](#) also highlights education as a public and common good, emphasizing inclusive education, universal access to education and higher education, teacher development, and health and well-being to support the implementation of NEP 2020. Similarly, [WHO \(2021, 2022, 2025\)](#) emphasizes promotion, prevention, and intervention across community and education contexts.

In India, NEP 2020 marks a significant policy shift, moving education from a single-streamed experience to a holistic and multidisciplinary one. In higher education, it provides supportive systems, professional academic and career counseling, and counselors to address students' physical, psychological, and emotional needs, including support for different student groups ([Kedar, 2026](#); [NEP, 2020](#); [Shinde et al., 2024](#)). These provisions establish a policy framework for higher education that includes student well-being.

However, policy recognition does not always mean institutional implementation. Existing scholarship on NEP 2020 has largely examined broader educational reform, governance, and implementation, with only a few studies and pieces of research that attempt to tie the well-being provisions in NEP 2020 more closely to institutional processes and student-level considerations ([Auerbach et al., 2018](#); [Padmambika et al., 2024](#); [Ruihua et al., 2025](#)).

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Student Well-Being in Higher Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes holistic student development as the core of education and requires higher education institutions to provide a conducive environment for student diversity ([Sivaraman et al., 2026](#)). The NEP aims to enable students to develop their intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral abilities through "multi-disciplinary and flexible learning".

Specifically, NEP 2020 includes provisions relevant to student support and wellbeing. It requires high-quality support centers, along with professional academic/career counseling and counselors, to help ensure that students' physical, psychological, and emotional needs are addressed, so support is not limited to academics. The provisions imply an educational understanding of students' well-being, which is not necessarily a medical or individual-level issue ([Dubey & Agrawal, 2021](#); [NEP, 2020](#); [Segú-Odrizola, 2025](#)).

However, the significance of these provisions in terms of the support systems actually established depends on how institutions implement them. This has raised questions about

institutional responsibility, professional capacity, available resources, referral systems, monitoring, and accountability. This study is a documentary and policy study because it is a secondary study and therefore focuses on the conceptualization and provision of student well-being under NEP 2020 and the institutional requirements for its operationalization.

Statement of the Problem

Despite NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic and learner-centered education, a significant gap remains between recognizing students' well-being and the mechanisms needed to operationalize it in higher education. Current evidence suggests there are significant concerns about student stress, anxiety, and emotional health, and the capacity for institutions to provide easy access to appropriate support is uneven.

While NEP 2020 acknowledges 'Well-being of the student', the guidelines are not specific about institutional responsibilities, implementation mechanisms, measurable outcomes, monitoring, or accountability for psychosocial support. Existing research has largely examined either student mental-health concerns or the broader implementation of NEP 2020, with limited attention to how national policy commitments are mediated through institutional structures to address student-level well-being and equity.

The problem, therefore, lies not simply in recognizing student well-being, but in the policy-to-practice gap between commitment, institutional operationalization, and accessible student support. This study addresses this gap by critically examining the conceptualization and provisions of student well-being in NEP 2020 and analyzing their implications through a macro-meso-micro policy-institution-student well-being perspective.

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the conceptualization of student well-being within the higher education provisions of NEP 2020.
2. To analyze the major NEP 2020 provisions relevant to students' mental, emotional, psychosocial, and broader well-being in higher education.
3. To identify institutional implementation requirements, gaps, and accountability challenges associated with translating NEP 2020's student well-being commitments into higher education practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Foundations of Student Well-Being

Student well-being in higher education is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct extending beyond the absence of mental illness to include psychological functioning, emotional stability, social connectedness, belonging, resilience, and meaningful academic and social participation.

A bibliometric analysis of 5,561 publications on the mental health and well-being of university students identified key research strands, including positive mental health, mental disorders, counseling, stigma, stress, and mental-health measurement, highlighting the field's broad diversity. The schools' educational and social contexts also influence student well-being. Academic demands, social relationships, transitions, and institutional support systems influence students' experiences and capacity to function effectively ([Auerbach et al., 2018](#); [Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020](#)).

The conceptual literature establishes two important premises for the present study. First, student well-being is broader than mental illness and includes positive and social dimensions. Second, these dimensions are situated within institutional environments rather than being

determined exclusively by individual characteristics.

The literature therefore provides a conceptual basis for examining student well-being at multiple levels. However, it does not explain how a national education policy translates this multidimensional conception into institutional responsibilities and implementation mechanisms. This unresolved connection underpins the policy–institution–student analytical framework adopted in the present study.

Mental Health Challenges among University Students

Empirical research provides substantial evidence that mental-health difficulties are a significant concern among university students. The WHO World Mental Health International College Student initiative, which included first-year students across 19 colleges in eight countries, documented a high prevalence of common mental disorders and highlighted the need for mental-health services in higher education ([Auerbach et al., 2018](#); [Shinde et al., 2024](#)).

In India, a systematic review and meta-analysis of 19 studies involving 5944 undergraduate medical students found a pooled prevalence of depression of about 50% and called for screening and counseling ([Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020](#); [Sheldon et al., 2021](#)).

Student distress is influenced by interacting academic, social, and financial factors, as well as support-related factors, making higher education institutions important settings for both risk and support ([Auerbach et al., 2018](#); [Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020](#)). However, prevalence studies establish the extent of mental-health concerns rather than whether national policies provide adequate institutional mechanisms to address them. This distinction matters when examining NEP 2020 without treating evidence of student distress as evidence of policy effectiveness or failure to address the conditions associated with student well-being.

Student Well-Being and Academic Outcomes

Student well-being affects educational functioning and mental health. Mental-health difficulties have been associated with poorer concentration, academic performance, and educational persistence among college students ([Eisenberg et al., 2009](#); [GoI, 2017](#)). However, these relationships are multidirectional, and academic, social, and psychological conditions can influence one another.

Higher education institutions are therefore key environments for preventing, counseling, supporting, and promoting positive mental health ([Auerbach et al., 2018](#); [Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020](#); [Ruihua et al., 2025](#)). Nevertheless, existing research primarily examines student-level relationships between well-being and educational outcomes. It provides limited insight into how national policy provisions establish and monitor the institutional mechanisms intended to support students. This creates a need to connect evidence on student outcomes with policy-level analysis of institutional implementation.

Policy Evidence: Global Perspectives and NEP 2020

International policy discourse increasingly recognizes education as a setting for intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development. [UNESCO \(2021a, 2021b\)](#) describes education as a public and common good that should respond to evolving social needs; the [WHO \(2021, 2022\)](#) emphasizes promotion, prevention, and intervention in education and community settings. These views help in the overall understanding of wellness in learning settings.

In India, NEP 2020 takes a broader view of education, including students' intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral growth, and establishing supportive systems for different categories of students ([Shinde et al., 2024](#)). It specifically provides support centers and professional academic and career guidance, including physical, psychological, and emotional counseling for students

(Kedar, 2026; NEP, 2020; Shijomon & Qureshi, 2023). These provisions define the policy commitment to supporting students.

However, policy provisions do not necessarily reflect implementation or measurable student outcomes. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether NEP 2020 recognizes well-being, but how it is expected to operationalize its commitments through institutional structures, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

Implementation and Institutional Challenges

This policy-aspiration-to-implementation gap is especially relevant concerning student well-being. Institutional capacity, professional resources, organizational arrangements, and monitoring and accountability are among the factors that help translate policy commitments into student support. The larger mental health system in India also shows that a significant proportion of individuals with mental health conditions are not receiving treatment, and that available treatment is limited, reflecting that policy recognition does not necessarily lead to adequate availability of support (NIMHANS, 2016a, 2016b).

Research also indicates that changes in the university environment, including approaches to learning and teaching and policies that reflect students' focus, could affect student well-being. However, the empirical evidence is weaker, less consistent, and of lower methodological quality. Institutions therefore play an important bridging role between national policies and students' experiences.

Research Gap and Rationale for the Present Study

Existing literature establishes that student well-being is a significant concern in higher education (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020); the existing research on NEP 2020 has been mainly related to the wide educational reform, governance, and implementation (Aulia et al., 2020; Benny et al., 2026; Shijomon & Qureshi, 2023).

However, these strands have rarely been integrated to examine how NEP 2020's commitment to students' well-being is translated through institutions into available student support. Similarly, from the Indian perspective, the significance of mental health concerns among students in higher education institutions has also been highlighted (Dubey & Agrawal, 2021; Sivaraman et al., 2026).

The main challenge is the interlinkage of three different levels: (i) macro-level policy commitments and conceptualization of wellbeing; (ii) meso-level institutional capacity, support systems, and accountability; and (iii) micro-level wellbeing and equity issues of students. However, policy recognition alone does not guarantee institutional implementation or student benefit.

This study addresses this gap through qualitative policy and document analysis using a macro-meso-micro policy-institution-student well-being framework. It identifies how NEP 2020 conceptualizes and provides for student well-being, institutional and accountability needs, and gaps, and highlights areas that need further empirical investigation. Because of its documentary approach, this study does not measure or evaluate the cause-and-effect impact of NEP 2020. Thus, it contributes to analysis and policy formulation and illuminates the link between policy commitment, institutional operationalization, and student well-being.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective, which views student well-being as shaped by interrelated individual, institutional, and broader social contexts (Härkönen, 2001). Building on this perspective, the study adopts a macro-meso-micro policy-institution-student well-being framework to organize documentary evidence.

1. **At the macro level**, the framework examines NEP 2020's conceptualization of holistic development, inclusion, student support, and well-being.
2. **At the meso level**, it examines institutions as the principal mediating context, focusing on support structures, counseling, faculty capacity, referral systems, resources, monitoring, and accountability.
3. **At the micro level**, it considers documented concerns relating to students' mental, emotional, psychosocial, social, and academic well-being, including equity and access.

This study does not collect primary student data; this level represents student-related concerns documented in existing evidence rather than directly measured outcomes. This pathway is analytical rather than causal and provides a basis for examining how policy commitments translate into institutional arrangements and student well-being considerations.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This study uses a qualitative policy and document analysis design to critically examine the conceptualization and policy provisions on student well-being in the higher education component of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The analysis draws on NEP 2020, relevant national and international policy documents, official and institutional reports, and peer-reviewed literature to examine how student well-being is conceptualized, what institutional mechanisms are required to operationalize it, and what implementation and equity concerns emerge from existing evidence.

The study is interpretive and analytical rather than causal or evaluative. No primary data were collected from students, faculty, institutions, or policymakers; therefore, the study does not directly measure the implementation or effects of NEP 2020 on student well-being. Instead, it examines policy intentions, institutional requirements, documented implementation concerns, and student-level evidence available in the selected sources.

Data Sources, Search Strategy and Document Selection

The evidence base comprised three categories: (1) national and international policy documents and official reports, (2) peer-reviewed academic literature, and (3) relevant institutional or evidence-based reports concerning higher education, student well-being, mental health, and policy implementation. NEP 2020 served as the central policy document, while related sources provided contextual and empirical support.

The online literature search was conducted in Web of Science, Scopus, SAGE Journals, JSTOR, and Google Scholar for the period 2000–2026. The search included the following keywords: NEP 2020, Higher Education, student well-being, mental health, psychosocial issues, policy, and implementation. The main search term used was: ("NEP 2020" OR "National Education Policy 2020") AND ("higher education" OR university OR college) AND ("student well-being" OR "student wellbeing" OR "mental health" OR psychosocial) AND (policy OR implementation OR institutional).

The searches yielded 180 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 45 sources remained for full-text assessment, and 32 were included in the final analysis. Sources were retained when they contributed substantively to at least one of the following: conceptualization of student well-being; policy provisions; institutional support mechanisms; implementation and governance challenges; or student-level well-being and equity concerns.

Policy and official documents were purposefully sampled for authority, policy relevance, substantive relevance, and evidentiary contribution. Where relevant, documents from the Government of India were included in the higher education, student support, mental health, and implementation sections, and documents from other organizations, such as WHO, UNESCO, and

UNICEF, were used for established conceptual and policy perspectives. Sources that lacked sufficient evidence-based data, were not available in full text, or were duplicated or targeted only to unrelated clinical populations were excluded.

The 2000–2026 period was selected to capture developments that contextualize student well-being frameworks before and after NEP 2020 and to place the policy within broader developments in higher education and student well-being. Earlier foundational works were included where necessary for the theoretical framework. The search was restricted to English-language sources, which may have excluded relevant evidence published in Indian regional languages.

Operationalization of the Macro–Meso–Micro Analytical Framework and Coding

The selected documents were analyzed through the macro–meso–micro analytical framework established in Section 2.7. The framework guided both deductive coding and subsequent thematic development.

1. **At the macro level**, documents were coded for policy commitments, conceptualizations of well-being, higher education priorities, inclusion, and institutional expectations.
2. **At the meso level**, coding focused on institutional support structures, counseling, faculty and staff capacity, referral mechanisms, resources, governance, monitoring, accountability, and implementation conditions.
3. **At the micro level**, coding addressed student well-being, stress, belonging, psychosocial needs, access to support, and equity-related concerns.

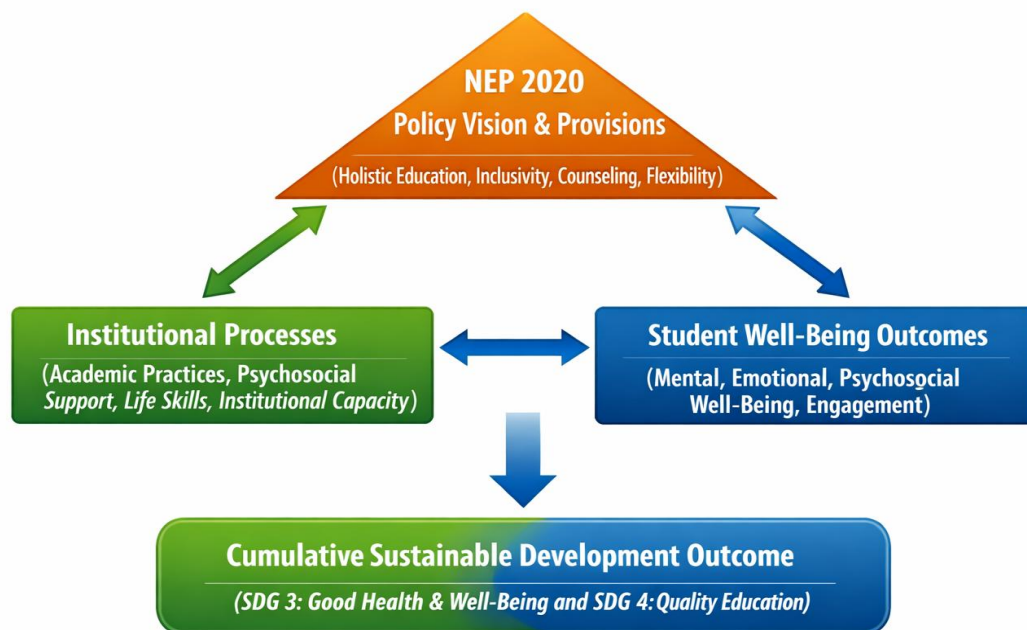


Figure 1. Policy–Institution–Outcome (PIO) Framework for Student Well-Being under NEP 2020
Source: Conceptualized by the author(s) based on [National Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#) guidelines and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3 & SDG 4).

This integrated framework connects with NEP 2020, institutional implementation, and student well-being. Figure 1 represents the Policy–Institution–Outcome (PIO) relationship, and Figure 2 operationalizes it through a Macro–Meso–Micro framework of national policy commitments (macro), institutional structures and implementation (meso), and student well-being

and equity considerations (micro). This approach aligns with findings that emphasize the need for a coordinated policy response, institutional accountability, relevant indicators, and accessible, school-based psychosocial support (NEP, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b; WHO, 2021, 2022, 2025).

The framework conceptualizes student wellbeing as a process rather than a stated outcome of policy implementation. It acknowledges that students' needs, experiences, and recorded outcomes can guide institutional monitoring and policy refinement. Thus, it acts as an analytical linkage between the goal of the policy, institutional development, student wellbeing, and the goals of SDG 3 (health and wellbeing) and SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education) (United Nations, 2015), while not making any direct causal claim about NEP 2020 (Bernstein, 2025; NEP, 2020; United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

Source Quality and Analytical Credibility

Source credibility was assessed based on authority, methodological transparency, relevance, and evidentiary contribution. Government and intergovernmental documents were considered primarily for institutional authority and policy status. Peer-reviewed studies were assessed for research clarity, methodological transparency, appropriate design, and clearly reported findings. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses received particular consideration when synthesizing empirical evidence.

Sources that were primarily opinion-based, insufficiently documented, or not clearly verifiable were excluded. Sources were interpreted according to their evidentiary status: policy documents represented policy intentions and institutional expectations, whereas empirical and institutional studies provided evidence on documented conditions or experiences. Policy provisions were therefore not treated as evidence of implementation or student-level effects.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available policy documents, official reports, and published academic literature and involved no direct interaction with human participants or collection of personally identifiable information. Accordingly, participant consent and field-level ethical procedures were not applicable. All secondary sources were appropriately acknowledged and cited.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's analysis is based on a macro-meso-micro framework that enables a systematic thematic examination of NEP 2020 and student well-being in higher education. NEP 2020 represents a significant expansion in higher-education policy framing, moving beyond academic and disciplinary attainment toward holistic student development.

The policy explicitly incorporates physical, psychological, and emotional well-being within its broader vision for higher education and proposes institutional support mechanisms such as counseling and student-support centers (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; NEP, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b).

1. Macro level (Policy Vision): NEP 2020 provides the broad normative framework that focuses on holistic education, inclusiveness, flexibility, and counseling support at the macro level (Policy Vision). Good student health is part of quality education and human development.
2. Meso level (Institutional Processes): Academic practices, psychosocial support systems, counseling services, life skills education, and capacity-building are some of the institutional processes that mediate the implementation of policies.

3. Micro level (Student Outcomes): Student well-being outcomes include mental, emotional, and psychosocial outcomes that reflect the manifestation of policy and institutional practices in real life. These outcomes also generate feedback used to reform the institution and recalibrate policy.

This study examines NEP 2020 and student well-being in higher education using a macro-meso-micro thematic framework. Figure 2 presents a policy-institution-outcome model that views student well-being as an emergent product of interaction among the national policy vision, institutional processes, and the student experience. The framework puts these dynamics through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 4 as described by (NEP, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b; UNICEF, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 2015; WHO, 2022, 2025).

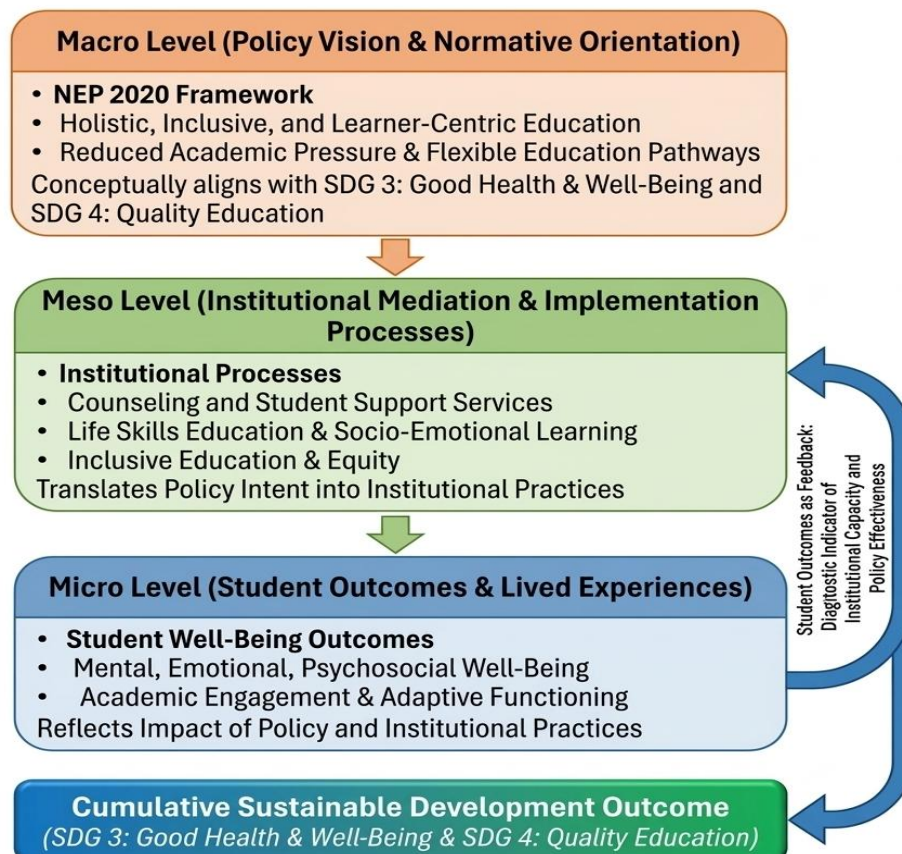


Figure 1. Macro–Meso–Micro Thematic Framework for Policy-to-Practice Implementation
Source: Developed by the author(s) synthesizing policy implementation literature and NEP 2020 provisions.

Macro Level: Policy Conceptualizations and System-Level Commitments

At the macro level, NEP 2020 serves as a defining conceptual and theoretical standard for student well-being in higher education. The policy reflects a paradigmatic shift from the current approach of examination-centric, rote-based learning to a holistic, multidisciplinary, and learning-centric education system (NEP, 2020). This vision encompasses student well-being by emphasizing holistic development, inclusiveness, flexibility, emotional development, and learner autonomy.

NEP 2020 clearly states that education should focus not only on cognitive skills but also on emotional, moral, social, and psychological development. This framing closely aligns with UNESCO's claim that meaningful and transformative education is not separate from student well-being and

mental health (GoI, 2017; UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b). There is a strong implication in the policy that the high level of stress associated with academic burdens harms mental health; this is reflected in the focus on the reduction of academic burden, happy learning, and flexible opportunities in the academic programs that have been extensively reported in the literature on higher education internationally (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021).

The NEP 2020 shows strong conceptual correspondence with global mental health and education frameworks. Student well-being is expressed at a macro level, and the tone is very inspirational. There are no explicit definitions, measurable indicators, or benchmarks for the outcomes of well-being in the policy, creating ambiguity in how student mental health will be operationalized and measured (NEP, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2022). Table 1 presents an overview of the NEP 2020 themes at the macro level that focus on student well-being, such as holistic learning, inclusivity and flexibility, counseling, and SDG alignment.

Table 1: Macro-Level Themes Related to Student Well-Being in NEP 2020
(Policy vision, normative orientation, and global alignment)

Themes Identified	Policy Orientation / Strategic Focus	Key Sources
Holistic Education & Learner-Centricity	Positions education as a process that fosters cognitive, emotional, ethical, social, and psychological development rather than examination-centric learning.	NEP (2020); Padmambika et al. (2024); Baral (2024); Gupta (2021)
Inclusivity & Equity	Emphasis on inclusive education for socio-economically disadvantaged, first-generation, and marginalized learners to reduce psychosocial vulnerability.	Sivaraman et al. (2026); Baral (2024); NEP (2020); Dubey and Agrawal (2021); Segú-Odriozola (2025)
Flexibility & Multidisciplinary Learning	Introduction of flexible curricular structures, multiple entry–exit options, and multidisciplinary pathways to reduce academic stress and rigidity.	Sivaraman et al. (2026); Eisenberg et al. (2009); Ruihua et al. (2025); Visser & Law-van Wyk (2021)
Counseling & Psychosocial Orientation	Recognizing guidance and counseling as integral to holistic development, and acknowledging mental and emotional support as part of educational quality.	Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020); Uher et al. (2023); Padmambika et al. (2024); Baral (2024)
Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals	Integration of student well-being with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), linking health and education outcomes.	United Nations General Assembly (2015); UNICEF (2021); UNESCO (2021a, 2021b)

Meso Level: Institutional Mediation and Implementation Capacity

At the meso level, realizing NEP 2020's well-being vision depends on institutional mediation, where policy intent is converted into tangible practices in higher education institutions. The institutional processes include academic structures; teaching methods, counseling systems, life-skills training, and capacity-building systems are the key areas in bridging the gap between policy and the real-life experiences of students (NEP, 2020).

NEP 2020 emphasizes counseling and student support services, as trained counselors in this context help reduce academic stress and emotional and psychosocial problems (NEP, 2020). The rationale for this focus is evidenced by empirical research findings that indicate that institutional

counseling services have a considerable impact on the reduction of anxiety, stress, and depression among university students (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). However, the policy's failure to specify counselor–student ratios, professional standards, or monitoring systems raises concerns about inequality in implementation across the institution.

The policy also advances life skills, moral reasoning, and socio-emotional learning as the means of developing resilience and emotional control. Research studies consistently show the same results: life-skills-based or socio-emotional learning interventions helped students boost their coping capacities and psychological adaptation (Aulia et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021a). Also, the promotion of NEP 2020's flexible curricula, multidisciplinary learning, and multiple-entry-exit opportunities aims to reduce the fear of failure and academic rigidity, structural factors of student stress and burnout (NEP, 2020; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021).

Despite these strengths, institutional capacity limitations such as poor funding, a shortage of trained mental health professionals, and a lack of faculty preparedness play an important mediating role in the efficiency of the policy implementation. The faculty members often act as first points of contact for troubled students but frequently lack formal training in mental health, identification, and support (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Shechtman et al., 2005). Such limitations highlight the difference between policy aspiration and institutional preparedness. Table 2 summarizes the NEP 2020's meso-level themes, showing how institutions support student well-being through pedagogy, counseling, life skills, faculty readiness, and implementation variability.

Table 2: Meso-Level Themes Related to Institutional Mediation of Student Well-Being
(*Institutional processes translating policy into practice*)

Themes Identified	Institutional Strategies / Mechanisms	Key Sources
Academic Structures & Pedagogical Practices	Adopting learner-friendly pedagogy, reducing curricular load, and implementing experiential learning and assessment reforms to lower academic pressure.	Härkönen (2001); Benny et al. (2026); Padmambika et al. (2024); Gupta (2021)
Counseling & Student Support Services	Provision of institutional counseling services to address stress, anxiety, depression, and academic challenges, though lacking standardized benchmarks.	Uher et al. (2023); Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020); Segú-Odriozola (2025)
Life Skills & Socio-Emotional Learning	Integrate life skills education, ethical reasoning, and emotional resilience to strengthen coping capacity and psychological adjustment.	Padmambika et al. (2024); Shijomon and Qureshi (2023); Shechtman et al. (2005); Gupta (2021)
Faculty Capacity & Institutional Readiness	Faculty's role as first responders to student distress is constrained by limited training and institutional resources.	Baral (2024); Sivaraman et al. (2026); Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020)
Implementation Variability	Uneven realization of NEP 2020 provisions due to funding shortages, infrastructural gaps, and decentralized implementation responsibility.	Shechtman et al. (2005); Sivaraman et al. (2026); Baral (2024); Benny et al. (2026)

Micro Level: Student Well-being, Equity and Expected Outcomes

At the micro level, student well-being is the lived reality of macro-level policy vision and meso-level institutional practices. The concept of student well-being is described as a multidimensional construct that includes mental, emotional, psychosocial, and adaptive functioning, rather than merely the absence of mental illness (Aulia et al., 2020; Padmambika et al., 2024; Segú-Odrizola, 2025).

NEP 2020's emphasis on reduced academic pressure, inclusive environments, and emotional development suggests an understanding that the educational context is a major determinant of students' psychological well-being. However, empirical research evidence indicates that students of higher education still face high stress levels, anxiety, and emotional distress.

Globally, mental health conditions account for about 13 percent of the total disease burden. This is attributed to mental illnesses; anxiety and depression are especially high among the younger age group between 15 and 29 years (WHO, 2021, 2022). Nationally, in India, it has been indicated that close to one out of every seven young people has mental health issues that would need to be addressed (NEP, 2020).

The digital divide and socio-economic inequalities also affect students' outcomes at a different level. First-generation learners and students with a marginalized background often face limited access to counseling services, digital tools, and a supportive campus atmosphere, and are thus unable to achieve the well-being goals of NEP 2020 at an equal rate (UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b; UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2021, 2022). These differences highlight that student well-being outcomes are not standardized and are strongly influenced by structural and institutional conditions.

Importantly, the framework acknowledges a feedback loop in which student well-being outcomes inform institutional practices and identify areas requiring policy support, redefinition, or revision. The mental health of students in poor condition is, therefore, a diagnostic indicator of gaps in institutional capacity and policy implementation. Table 3 summarizes the NEP 2020's micro-level themes, highlighting student well-being outcomes in mental health, emotional resilience, academic engagement, equity, and feedback for policy and institutional improvement.

Table 3: Micro-Level Themes Related to Student Well-Being Outcomes
(Student-level experiences and feedback effects)

Themes Identified	Student Well-Being Outcomes	Key Sources
Mental Well-Being	Prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among higher education students despite policy emphasis on well-being.	Padmambika et al. (2024); Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020); Segú-Odrizola (2025)
Emotional & Psychosocial Health	Institutional support and learning environments influence resilience, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning.	Visser & Law-van Wyk (2021); Shijomon and Qureshi (2023); Aulia et al., 2020; NIMHANS (2016b, 2016a)
Academic Engagement & Adaptation	Relationship between mental well-being, sustained motivation, academic engagement, and learning outcomes.	Padmambika et al. (2024); Härkönen (2001); Segú-Odrizola (2025); Baral (2024)
Equity of Student Experience	Socio-economic status, digital access, and institutional support shape differential well-being outcomes, disproportionately affecting marginalized learners.	Segú-Odrizola (2025); Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021; Dubey & Agrawal (2021); UNICEF (2021)

Feedback for Institutional & Policy Reform	Student well-being outcomes serve as diagnostic indicators for gaps in institutional practices and policy implementation.	Sivaraman et al. (2026) ; Benny et al. (2026) ; Segú-Odriozola (2025)
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The thematic analysis indicates that student well-being is an important connection that can be seen as an integration between education policy and sustainable development. Conceptually, NEP 2020 has been linked with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), which recognizes the interdependency between mental health and quality of education ([NEP, 2020](#); [NIMHANS, 2016a, 2016b](#); [UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b](#); [UNICEF, 2021](#)).

However, the lack of clear mental health indicators and accountability systems restricts the policy's capacity to contribute directly to measurable SDG outcomes. Altogether, the macro-meso-micro themes show that institutional mediation and structural equity are needed to ensure student well-being outcomes, even as NEP 2020 provides a progressive normative vision. Without clear standards, sufficient resources, and effective monitoring, student well-being becomes an ideal rather than a measurable, achievable outcome of higher education reform.

CONCLUSIONS

Student well-being is fundamental to sustainable educational success, as academic achievement cannot be separated from emotional and psychological well-being. In this context, NEP 2020 marks an important policy shift by placing holistic, inclusive, and learner-centered development at the core of higher education.

This study critically examined the conceptualization and policy provisions related to student well-being in NEP 2020 through qualitative policy and document analysis. The findings indicate a clear recognition-to-operationalization gap: although the policy strongly acknowledges students' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being, its effective realization depends on institutional capacity, accessible support services, measurable indicators, monitoring, and accountability.

The macro-meso-micro analysis further shows that national policy commitments do not translate directly into student outcomes. Higher education institutions serve as the critical mediating layer through which policy is converted into support structures and accessible services. At the same time, institutional and policy responses should be informed by student needs and equity considerations.

The present study contributes a policy-analytical rather than causal understanding of student well-being under NEP 2020. Its central argument is that the success of a well-being-oriented policy depends not only on the strength of its commitments but also on how fully institutions operationalize them, make them equitably accessible, and monitor them systematically. Strengthening this policy-to-practice pathway is essential for making the holistic vision of NEP 2020 a meaningful and consistent reality in higher education.

Implications for Policy and Practice

First, Implications for National Policymakers: National and regulatory authorities should translate NEP 2020's well-being commitments into minimum implementation standards and measurable accountability mechanisms. Monitoring should focus on functional, accessible, and qualified support services rather than their formal existence.

Second, Implications for higher education institutions: Higher Education Institutions must view student well-being as a whole-institutional responsibility, making counseling, academic advising, welfare, disability support, and referral functions interrelated within the institution. Support will be available and responsive to all students' needs, with clear referral pathways and

regular reviews.

Third, implications for faculty and staff: Faculty and staff must be trained to identify distress, respond sensitively, maintain appropriate boundaries, and make referrals, but not to be professional mental-health providers. Individual teachers should not bear full responsibility for student welfare; institutions should have clear procedures.

Fourth, Implications for Student-Support Services and Peer Support: Student-support systems should combine professional services, peer support, and preventive well-being initiatives. Peer programs should promote awareness, social connectedness, and early identification while operating within clear boundaries and referral mechanisms.

Fifth, Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability: Monitoring should shift from provision-based to implementation- and access-based assessment. Key indicators should include qualified personnel, service accessibility, referral and follow-up mechanisms, staff training, student awareness, feedback, and periodic assessment of unmet needs.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

Limitations of the Study

This study has several methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the documentary design relies on policy documents, official reports, and published literature and does not include primary data from students, faculty, counselors, or institutional actors. Therefore, the study is directly limited in assessing whether NEP 2020 is implemented, experienced, or accessed across individual institutions.

Second, NEP 2020 lacks longitudinal or causal evidence to assess whether it has had any impact on measurable improvements in student well-being, mental health, academic engagement, or educational outcomes. The findings should therefore be understood as a critical analysis rather than an assessment of the policy's effects. Third, relevant scholarship, institutional documentation, and policy discussions in Indian regional languages might not have been part of the English-language evidence base, which could have reduced the evidence base produced locally.

Fourth, researcher coding may introduce interpretive bias. However, coding categories, repeated review, source comparison, and triangulation strengthened analytical credibility. Finally, the 2000–2026 evidence windows brought together studies developed under different policy and institutional contexts. Earlier literature was therefore used primarily for conceptual and contextual grounding, while post-NEP evidence was considered more directly for contemporary implementation issues.

Directions for Further Research

Future research should move from policy analysis towards empirical testing of implementation, accessibility, and outcomes. First, multi-site institutional studies should assess how NEP 2020's student-support provisions are operationalized through counseling, referral systems, trained personnel, accessibility, and monitoring, comparing institutions and resource settings.

Second, student-centered research should examine awareness, accessibility, barriers, and equity in support services, particularly across socioeconomic, geographic, disability, and other relevant groups. Third, longitudinal and comparative studies should test whether increased institutional support is associated with improved student well-being, increased help-seeking, greater academic engagement, and higher retention, using stronger evaluation designs where feasible.

Fourth, future studies need to empirically test the macro-meso-micro framework by examining institutional responses to student needs and feedback, and how these responses affect

policy implementation. Last but not least, research that leverages Indian-language scholarship and institutional evidence would strengthen the evidence base and provide a more context-sensitive understanding of student well-being across diverse higher education settings.

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