THE INTERPLAY OF MENTAL WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC PRODUCTIVITY AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN INDIA: A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex relationship between mental well-being and academic productivity among postgraduate students at an Indian university, contextualized within an escalating national mental health crisis in higher education. Amidst intense academic pressure and unique sociocultural stressors, understanding the psychological landscape of advanced-degree candidates is critical for institutional and national policy. This research employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design, surveying 150 postgraduate, and Ph.D. students across Science, Arts, and Commerce disciplines. Mental well-being was assessed using a suite of standardized instruments, including the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), while academic productivity was measured via custom metrics of motivation, focus, and satisfaction. Statistical analyses, including correlation, Chi-Square tests, and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), were conducted to explore these dynamics. The findings reveal a high prevalence of psychological distress within the sample and a significant, strong negative correlation between indicators of stress, anxiety, and depression, and measures of academic motivation and satisfaction. A pivotal finding emerged from the MANOVA, which indicated statistically significant differences in mental health profiles across academic disciplines. Post-hoc analyses identified students in the Science stream as a particularly vulnerable group, reporting significantly higher levels of anxiety and hopelessness compared to their peers in Arts and Commerce. These results underscore the inadequacy of a regular approach to student mental health. The study concludes with evidence-based recommendations for developing tailored, field-specific mental health interventions, enhancing institutional support systems, and integrating campus services with national mental health initiatives to foster a more resilient and productive academic community.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Systemic Mental Health Challenge in Indian Higher Education

The landscape of higher education in India is undergoing a profound and unsettling transformation, marked by a systemic mental health crisis that poses a significant threat to the well-being and potential of its student population. Once viewed as isolated incidents, psychological distress, anxiety, and depression are now recognized as persistent challenges woven into the very fabric of academic life. Recent multi-city studies paint a stark and alarming picture: nearly 70% of Indian college students report experiencing moderate to high levels of anxiety, while approximately 60% exhibit discernible signs of depression. More than 70% of students report elevated levels of emotional distress, signalling a widespread struggle to cope with the multifaceted pressures of their environment. This escalating crisis has been further compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which not only disrupted academic routines but also intensified feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities.

This phenomenon is not merely a collection of individual struggles but a reflection of deep-seated systemic and cultural pressures. The Indian educational system is characterized by a hyper-competitive ethos, often described as a "Perform or Perish" culture, where academic performance is indistinguishably linked to societal status and future success [1]. This environment is fuelled by immense parental and societal expectations, which place a relentless burden on students to excel. From an early age, students are funnelled into a high-stakes race for top ranks and admission into prestigious institutions, a journey that often prioritizes rote memorization and examination scores over holistic development and emotional well-being [1]. This relentless pressure, coupled with a cultural stigma that often discourages open conversations about mental health, creates a fertile ground for psychological distress to flourish, frequently in silence. The consequences are severe, manifesting in burnout, diminished academic engagement, and, in tragic cases, alarmingly high rates of student suicide [2]. Addressing this crisis is therefore not just a matter of providing support but requires a fundamental re-examination of the educational environment and the cultural values that shape it.

1.2. Academic Stressors in Postgraduate and Doctoral Studies

While the mental health crisis affects students across all levels, the challenges are particularly acute for those pursuing postgraduate (PG) and Ph.D. degrees. This demographic navigates a unique and intensified set of stressors that distinguish their experience from that of their undergraduate counterparts. Research consistently indicates that postgraduate students experience significantly higher levels of academic stress, which in turn is correlated with poorer academic performance [3]. The core stressors identified in the literature include unmanageable academic overload, a pervasive fear of failure, interpersonal

difficulties, and immense pressure from both faculty and family [4]. For these advanced students, the pressures extend beyond coursework to include the demands of original research, the anxieties of thesis or dissertation writing, financial instability, and profound uncertainty about future career prospects in a competitive job market.

The transition from the often highly structured environment of undergraduate education to the ambiguous and self-directed nature of postgraduate research represents a critical stress amplification point. This is not simply an increase in workload but a qualitative shift in academic and personal responsibility. Students are expected to demonstrate a high degree of intellectual autonomy, self-motivation, and resilience in the face of research setbacks and prolonged project timelines. The internalized "Perform or Perish" culture becomes particularly potent when success or failure in a multi-year research project is perceived as resting solely on the individual's shoulders. This shift can overwhelm existing coping mechanisms, as the nature of the stress itself, characterized by ambiguity, isolation, and long-term uncertainty, is fundamentally different from the more predictable, short-term stressors of undergraduate life. Consequently, interventions aimed at this population must do more than offer generic stress management; they must specifically support students in navigating the psychological and practical challenges inherent in the transition to becoming independent researchers. Without such targeted support, the risk of burnout, disengagement, and significant mental health decline is exceptionally high.

1.3. A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Academic Stress: Appraisal and Coping

To effectively analyse the dynamics of student stress, it is essential to move beyond a simple stimulus-response model and adopt a framework that accounts for the subjective nature of the stress experience. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), provides a robust theoretical lens for this purpose. This model posits that stress is not an external event but rather a dynamic and reciprocal transaction between an individual and their environment. The experience of stress is mediated by a person's cognitive appraisal of the situation, a process that unfolds in two key stages [4].

The first stage, **primary appraisal**, involves the individual's evaluation of the significance of an event or situation. The person assesses whether the encounter is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. If deemed stressful, it is further categorized as a threat (anticipating potential harm or loss), a challenge (seeing an opportunity for growth or mastery), or harm-loss (concerning damage that has already occurred). In an academic context, an upcoming dissertation defence might be appraised as a "challenge" by a well-prepared student, fostering motivation and focus. Conversely, the same event could be appraised as a "threat" by a student lacking confidence, triggering anxiety and avoidance[4].

The second stage, **secondary appraisal**, occurs concurrently and involves the individual's assessment of their coping resources and options. The person evaluates what can be done to manage the situation, considering their internal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, problem-solving skills) and external resources (e.g., social support, financial stability). The interplay between primary and secondary appraisals determines the intensity and nature of the stress response.

Following appraisal, individuals engage in coping strategies, which Lazarus and Folkman broadly categorize into two types. **Problem-focused coping** involves direct efforts to alter or manage the source of the stress (e.g., creating a detailed study schedule, seeking guidance from a supervisor). **Emotion-focused coping** involves attempts to regulate the emotional distress associated with the situation (e.g., seeking emotional support from peers, practicing mindfulness, or engaging in wishful thinking). This theoretical framework is particularly valuable for the present study as it helps explain why students within the same demanding academic environment can exhibit vastly different levels of distress and academic productivity. It shifts the analytical focus from the mere presence of stressors to the students' perceptions, interpretations, and active efforts to manage them.

1.4. The Present Study: Rationale, Objectives, and Hypotheses

While there is a growing awareness of the mental health crisis in Indian higher education, a significant gap remains in the literature concerning granular, institution-specific data that explores how these challenges manifest across different academic disciplines. Much of the existing research treats the student body as a monolith, potentially obscuring critical variations that could inform more effective, targeted interventions. The present study aims to address this gap by providing a detailed, cross-disciplinary analysis of mental well-being and its relationship with academic productivity among postgraduate students.

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:
1. To assess the prevalence and severity of depression, anxiety, and stress among postgraduate and Ph.D. students.
2. To examine the relationship between these key indicators of mental well-being and self-reported academic outcomes, including productivity, motivation, and satisfaction.
3. To investigate demographic and, crucially, disciplinary differences in mental well-being, with a specific focus on comparing the psychological profiles of students enrolled in Science, Arts, and Commerce streams.

Based on the theoretical framework and the existing body of national research, the following hypotheses were formulated:
1. **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant negative correlation between students' scores on measures of depression, anxiety, and stress, and their self-reported levels of academic productivity and satisfaction.
2. **Hypothesis 2:** There will be statistically significant differences in the composite mental well-being profiles of

students based on their primary field of study (Science, Arts, or Commerce)

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive research design. This approach was selected to capture a snapshot of the mental well-being and academic productivity of the target population at a single point in time. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered online questionnaire, which allowed for the systematic gathering of information on demographic characteristics, psychological states, and academic experiences. The design facilitates the exploration of associations and correlations between variables and the comparison of different subgroups within the sample, thereby addressing the core research objectives.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

The research was conducted in two phases. An initial pilot study was conducted with a sample of 50 students to refine the survey instrument and preliminary analytical approach. The final analysis presented in this paper is based on a larger, subsequent data collection effort that yielded a sample of 150 participants.

The sample comprised 150 students actively enrolled in postgraduate (PG) and Ph.D. programs in Chennai. Participants were drawn from a diverse range of academic disciplines, categorized into three broad streams: Science, Arts, and Commerce. A convenience sampling method was utilized for participant recruitment, wherein students were invited to participate via online channels.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed throughout the research process. An informed consent statement was presented at the beginning of the online survey, clearly outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, with data being aggregated and anonymized for analysis to protect individual privacy. Data collection was completed using Google Forms, an accessible and user-friendly online platform.

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N=150)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18-24 years	141	94.0%
	Above 24 years	9	6.0%
Gender	Male	96	64.0%
	Female	54	36.0%
Academic Level	Postgraduate (PG)	144	96.0%
	Ph.D.	6	4.0%
Field of Study	Science	105	70.0%
	Arts	33	22.0%
	Commerce	12	8.0%

Note: Demographic data synthesized from the provided materials. The distribution reflects the composition of the larger sample (N=150) where available, supplemented by proportions from the pilot sample (N=50) for variables not detailed for the larger group.

2.3. Measures

A multi-instrument questionnaire was designed to collect comprehensive data on participant demographics, mental well-being, and academic productivity.

- **Demographic Information:** Participants provided information on their age, gender, current academic program (PG or Ph.D.), and primary field of study (Science, Arts, or Commerce).
- **Mental Well-being:** A battery of validated scales was used to assess various facets of mental health:
  - **Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21):** This 21-item self-report instrument is a widely used and psychometrically sound tool for measuring the core symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress over the past week. It consists of three 7-item subscales. Its validity and reliability have been established in numerous studies involving Indian student populations, making it an appropriate choice for this research context. Final scores for each subscale are calculated by summing the item scores and multiplying by two, as per standard scoring protocol [5].
  - **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):** This scale was included to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. It assesses the perception of stress and the ability to handle such stress.
  - **WHO-5 Well-Being Index:** This brief 5-item scale provides a measure of general positive well-being and emotional health, serving as a concise indicator of the participants' overall subjective psychological state.
- **Academic Productivity:** As standardized measures of academic productivity are less common, a series of custom questions was developed for this study. These items used a Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 to 7) to assess key dimensions of the academic experience, including:
  - Academic motivation
  - Ability to focus and concentrate
  - Perceived academic support from peers and faculty
  - Overall satisfaction with academic productivity

2.4. Data Analysis Strategy

All collected data were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis was conducted in several stages to address the different research objectives.

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the demographic profile of the sample and to describe the overall levels and distribution of the mental well-being and academic productivity variables.
- **Inferential Statistics:** A series of inferential tests were performed to examine relationships and differences within the data:
  - **Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation:** This non-parametric test was used to explore the strength and direction of the monotonic relationship between the ordinal variables of mental well-being (e.g., stress levels) and academic outcomes (e.g., academic satisfaction).
  - **Chi-Square Test for Independence:** This test was employed to determine if there was a statistically significant association between key categorical variables. Specific analyses included examining the relationship between gender and field of study, gender and academic level, and gender and academic motivation.
  - **Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA):** This advanced statistical technique was the primary method used to test for differences in mental well-being across the three academic disciplines (Science, Arts, Commerce).

MANOVA was chosen over conducting multiple separate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) because it tests for differences on a combination of multiple, correlated dependent variables (the various mental well-being indicators) simultaneously. This approach provides a more holistic insight into group differences and, critically, controls the experiment-wise error rate, avoiding the inflation of Type I errors that would occur with repeated ANOVAs. A significant MANOVA result was followed by univariate ANOVAs and post-hoc tests to identify which specific mental health variables differed significantly between the groups.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Prevalence of Psychological Distress

Descriptive analysis of the DASS-21 scores revealed a notable prevalence of psychological distress among the postgraduate student sample. To provide a clinically relevant perspective on the extent of these challenges, participant scores on each subscale were categorized into severity levels based on established cut-offs[6]. The distribution of participants across these categories is presented in Table 2. The findings indicate that a substantial portion of the student population is experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress that fall outside the 'normal' range. Specifically, anxiety appears to be the most widespread issue, with a significant percentage of students reporting symptoms at moderate to extremely severe levels.

Table 2: Prevalence Rates of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress (DASS-21 Severity Levels, N=150)

DASS-21 Subscale	Severity Level	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Depression	Normal	0-9	68	45.3%
	Mild	10-13	22	14.7%
	Moderate	14-20	44	29.3%
	Severe	21-27	6	4.0%
	Extremely Severe	28+	10	6.7%
Anxiety	Normal	0-7	54	36.0%
	Mild	8-9	14	9.3%
	Moderate	10-14	46	30.7%
	Severe	15-19	15	10.0%
	Extremely Severe	20+	21	14.0%
Stress	Normal	0-14	99	66.0%
	Mild	15-18	27	18.0%
	Moderate	19-25	15	10.0%
	Severe	26-33	9	6.0%
	Extremely Severe	34+	0	0.0%

Note: Percentages are calculated based on the total sample size of 150. Severity level score ranges are based on established DASS-21 scoring guidelines.
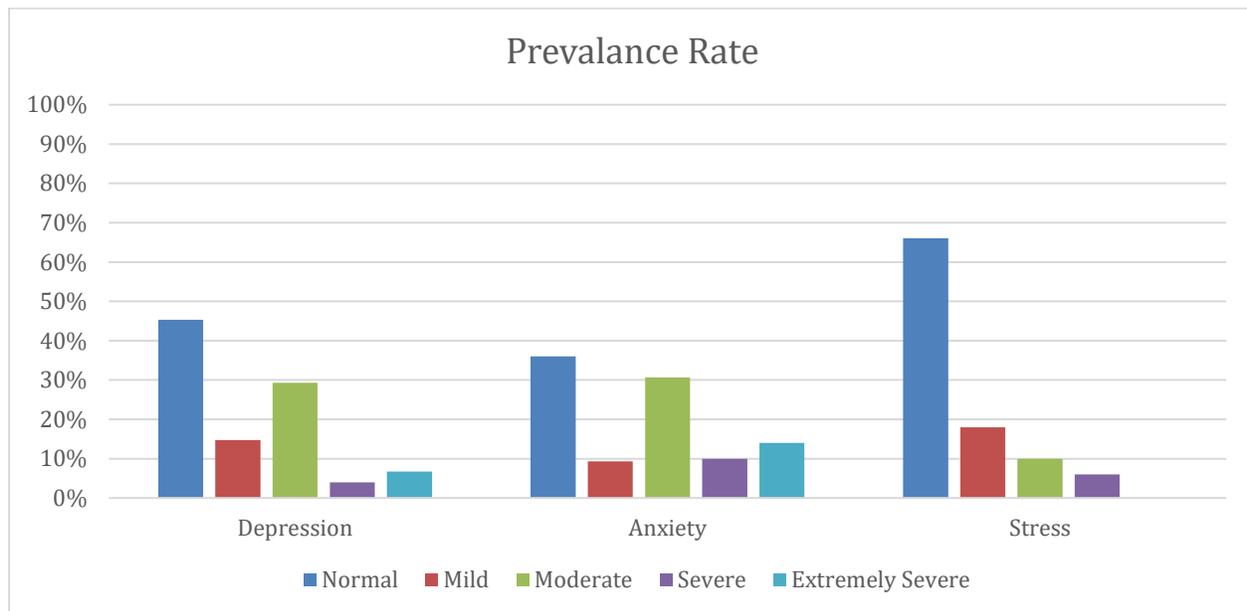
Figure 1: Percentage representation of prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21 Severity Levels, N=150)

3.2. The Relationship Between Mental Well-being and Academic Productivity

To investigate the first hypothesis regarding the interplay between mental health and academic functioning, a Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis was conducted. The analysis examined the relationships between specific indicators of psychological distress (derived from DASS-21 items) and self-reported measures of academic motivation and productivity satisfaction. The results, summarized in Table 3, provide strong support for the hypothesis.

A consistent pattern of moderate to strong, statistically significant negative correlations was observed. For instance, the inability to experience positive feelings ("I couldn't seem to experience positive feeling") showed a very strong negative correlation with academic motivation ($r = -0.70$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, feeling that life was meaningless was strongly and negatively associated with both motivation ($r = -0.50$, $p < 0.01$) and productivity satisfaction ($r = -0.40$, $p < 0.01$). Other indicators of stress and anxiety, such as difficulty relaxing and feeling down-hearted, also demonstrated significant negative relationships with academic outcomes. Conversely, these same distress indicators were significantly and positively correlated with the perception that stress adversely affects productivity. For example, feeling that life was meaningless had a strong positive correlation with the belief that stress impacts productivity ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$). These findings empirically substantiate the claim that as psychological distress increases, student's motivation and satisfaction with their academic work decline significantly.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix of Mental Well-being Indicators and Academic Productivity Variables (N=150)

Mental Well-being Indicator (DASS-21 Item)	Academic Motivation	Productivity Satisfaction	Stress Affects Productivity
I found it hard to wind down	-0.45	-0.32	0.38
I couldn't seem to experience positive feeling	-0.70	-0.35	0.42
I felt that I had nothing to look forward to	-0.38	-0.30	0.36
I found myself getting agitated	-0.35	-0.28	0.33
I found it difficult to relax	-0.42	-0.34	0.40
I felt down-hearted and blue	-0.47	-0.37	0.45
I felt that life was meaningless	-0.50	-0.40	0.48

*Note: Values are Spearman's rho (r) correlation coefficients.

3.3. Demographic Factors in Academic Life

Chi-Square tests for independence were performed to explore associations between key demographic variables. The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between gender and field of study ($\chi^2 = 15.2$, $p = 0.004$). This indicates that the distribution of male and female students was not uniform across the Science, Arts, and Commerce disciplines. A significant association was also found between gender and academic level

(pursuing PG vs. Ph.D.) ($\chi^2 = 8.5$, p = 0.014), suggesting that gender representation differed between postgraduate and doctoral programs within this sample.

Furthermore, an analysis conducted on the pilot sample (N=50) explored the relationship between demographic factors and academic motivation. A significant association was found between gender and academic motivation ($\chi^2 = 13.468$, p = 0.009). This result suggests that male and female students reported different patterns of academic motivation. However, the Chi-Square test examining the relationship between perceived stress levels and academic motivation in the same pilot sample was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.358$, p = 0.222), indicating that, within that dataset, a direct categorical association between stress level and motivation level was not established.

3.4. Disciplinary Differences in Mental Well-being: A Multivariate Analysis

To test the second hypothesis that mental well-being profiles would differ across academic disciplines, a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The independent variable was the field of study (Science, Arts, Commerce), and the dependent variables were a set of seven key mental well-being indicators, including anxiety and hopelessness.

The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect for field of study on the combined dependent variables, as indicated by Pillai's Trace (V = 0.18, p = 0.03). This test confirms that the mental well-being profiles of students differed significantly based on their academic discipline, supporting the second research hypothesis.

To identify the specific aspects of mental well-being that contributed to this overall difference, follow-up univariate ANOVAs were examined for each dependent variable. As shown in Table 4, these tests revealed statistically significant differences between the disciplines on two key variables: Anxiety (F = 6.45, p = 0.002) and Hopelessness (F = 4.12, p = 0.018). No significant differences were found for the other mental well-being variables.

To pinpoint the exact nature of these differences, post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test were performed. For Anxiety, the post-hoc tests indicated that students in the Science stream reported significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to students in both the Arts stream (p = 0.001) and the Commerce stream (p = 0.005). A similar pattern emerged for Hopelessness, with science students reporting significantly higher levels than their counterparts in the Arts (p = 0.003) and Commerce (p = 0.012) streams. No significant differences were found between the Arts and Commerce students on either variable. These results clearly identify students in the Science discipline as a group experiencing heightened levels of specific forms of psychological distress.

Table 4: Summary of MANOVA and Follow-up ANOVA Results for Field of Study on Mental Well-being Variables

Analysis	Test Statistic	Value	F-value	p-value	Post-Hoc Findings Summary
MANOVA	Pillai's Trace	0.18	2.45	0.03	-
Follow-up ANOVAs					
Anxiety	-	-	6.45	0.002	Science > Arts; Science > Commerce
Hopelessness	-	-	4.12	0.018	Science > Arts; Science > Commerce

Note: The MANOVA result indicates a significant overall difference between the groups. Follow-up ANOVAs identify the specific dependent variables driving this difference. Post-hoc findings are based on Tukey HSD tests.

4. DISCUSSION

This study provides a multi-faceted empirical examination of the mental well-being of postgraduate students in an Indian university. The findings confirm a high prevalence of psychological distress, with a notable proportion of students experiencing clinically significant symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. The analysis also establishes a strong, statistically significant inverse relationship between this distress and academic productivity; as symptoms increase, academic motivation and satisfaction markedly decrease.

Perhaps most significantly, the study uncovers critical variations in mental health across academic disciplines. The multivariate analysis demonstrates that students in the Science stream are a particularly vulnerable demographic, reporting significantly higher levels of anxiety and hopelessness than their peers in Arts and Commerce. This result is consistent with broader studies suggesting that science students in India face higher academic stress.[2] The reasons are likely complex, stemming from the unique culture of STEM disciplines, which are often characterized by intense competition, a rigid curriculum, and a pedagogical emphasis on definitive answers that can cultivate a profound fear of failure.[1] Furthermore, the "culture of objectivity" in these fields may implicitly devalue subjective emotional struggles, creating a discipline-specific barrier to help-seeking that compounds the general societal stigma surrounding mental health in India.

The empirical results have significant implications. Theoretically, the findings support Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, suggesting the academic environment itself shapes how students appraise stressors. Practically, the identification of science students as a high-risk group demonstrates that a generic, one-size-fits-all approach to mental

health services is insufficient. The findings mandate a shift toward tailored, discipline-specific interventions that address the unique cultural and environmental factors contributing to poor mental health.

The study's limitations must be acknowledged. The use of a convenience sample from a single university, reliance on self-report measures, and a cross-sectional design restrict generalizability and preclude causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs with larger, more diverse samples to track student mental health over time and establish causal relationships. A multi-method approach combining quantitative surveys with qualitative methods would also provide a richer understanding of the student experience.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1. Concluding Remarks
This research provides critical empirical evidence of the significant mental health burden carried by postgraduate students in the Indian higher education system. It moves beyond general assertions by quantifying the prevalence of distress and demonstrating its powerful, detrimental link to academic productivity. The study's most crucial contribution lies in its revelation that this burden is not borne equally across the academic landscape. By identifying students in the Science disciplines as a group with heightened vulnerability to anxiety and hopelessness, this work challenges institutions to adopt a more nuanced, data-driven, and targeted approach to student wellness. The findings serve as an urgent call to action for university leaders and policymakers to recognize mental well-being not as an ancillary service, but as a core component of academic success and human potential.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed for higher education institutions:
1. **Develop Field-Specific Mental Health Programs:** Move beyond generic support to design targeted stress-management workshops and resilience-building programs for students in high-pressure disciplines like the Sciences, using culturally attuned language and frameworks.
2. **Enhance and Pro-actively Deploy Counselling Services:** Address understaffing in counselling centres by hiring more professionals and shifting from a reactive to a proactive, preventative model. Embed well-being into the campus culture through orientation programs, regular workshops, and campaigns that normalize conversations about mental health.
3. **Implement Comprehensive Faculty Training:** Implement mandatory training programs to equip faculty to recognize at-risk students, engage in supportive conversations, and make effective referrals to professional services, creating a campus-wide support network.
4. **Conduct Systemic Reviews of Academic Workload:** Encourage academic departments, particularly in high-stress fields, to conduct systematic reviews of curriculum, workload, and assessment methods to identify and mitigate

structural stressors and promote a healthier study-life balance.

5.3. Recommendations for National Policy
The challenges identified in this study are systemic and require a coordinated response at the national level. The following policy recommendations are proposed:
1. **Bridge the Gap Between Campus Services and National Initiatives:** Mandate and facilitate the formal integration of university wellness services with the National Tele Mental Health Programme (Tele-MANAS). This creates a multi-tiered system of care that leverages national infrastructure to address on-campus issues of resource scarcity and stigma.
2. **Strengthen and Enforce UGC Mandates:** Strengthen the enforcement of UGC guidelines for functional mental health centres by including student well-being metrics as a formal component of institutional accreditation and ranking frameworks (e.g., NAAC).
3. **Promote and Fund Digital Mental Health Solutions:** Encourage and fund the adoption of digital mental health technologies, such as AI-based chatbots and tele-counselling, to expand the reach of support, particularly in rural and semi-urban institutions[7] .

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