

Academic Stress and Psychological Wellbeing of Higher Education Students in the NEP 2020 Era: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has always demanded long hours, delayed gratification, and a tolerance for uncertainty, but the last few years have made the psychological cost of that demand impossible to ignore. Meta-analytic work now puts anxiety among graduate as well as postgraduate students at roughly a third worldwide, and depression estimates cover an even wider range, with doctoral students consistently reporting more distress than their undergraduate peers (Chi et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2018). In India, this picture has collided with a major policy shift: the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which promised multidisciplinary, flexible, and "holistic" higher education, explicitly naming mental health as a curricular and institutional priority for the first time in the country's education-policy history. This review brings these two conversations together. It examines what is currently known about academic stress and psychological wellbeing among higher education students, both globally and within India, and asks how far NEP 2020's stated commitments to student wellbeing have translated into structures that actually reach higher education learners. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and recent Indian survey data, the review argues that while NEP 2020 provides an unusually explicit policy opening for mental health integration, its language is concentrated on school and undergraduate stages, leaving the specific stressors of research-based graduate education - supervision dynamics, funding precarity, publication pressure, and career uncertainty - largely unaddressed. The review closes with recommendations for institutions and policymakers seeking to close this gap.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Academic Stress, Graduate Students, Psychological Wellbeing, NEP 2020, Higher Education Policy, India*

The psychological wellbeing of students enrolled in higher education and doctoral programmes has, over the past decade, moved from the margins of higher-education discourse toward its centre. What was once treated as an individual coping problem is now widely understood within the empirical literature as a structural feature of higher education training itself, reproduced across institutions, disciplines, and national contexts (Evans et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). This reframing is supported by a substantial and growing evidence base. A systematic review and meta-analysis synthesising fifty independent studies and nearly forty thousand graduate students estimated that

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approximately thirty-five percent experience clinically significant anxiety, with doctoral candidates consistently reporting greater distress than their master's-level counterparts, and with prevalence trending upward over successive cohorts rather than stabilising (Chi et al., 2023). Such figures situate graduate student mental health not as an anomaly confined to a handful of high-pressure disciplines, but as a near-universal feature of advanced academic training that merits sustained scholarly and policy attention.

Within India, this global pattern is inflected by conditions specific to the national higher-education system: highly competitive entrance processes, a research-mentorship culture that is still consolidating institutional standards, chronic delays in fellowship and stipend disbursement, and, for many students, an implicit familial expectation that a postgraduate qualification will resolve economic and social anxieties that predate the degree itself. Epidemiological data corroborate the scale of this burden at the population level: India's National Mental Health Survey found a treatment gap exceeding eighty percent for common mental disorders, indicating that the large majority of affected individuals, students included, never access formal care (Gautham et al., 2020). Discipline-specific studies of Indian postgraduate and doctoral populations reinforce this picture, documenting levels of psychological distress that frequently exceed global averages (Ahmad & Suresh, 2025; Shete & Garkal, 2015), while research on help-seeking behaviour suggests that stigma, confidentiality concerns, and limited awareness of available services compound the underlying distress by discouraging students from seeking support even when it exists (Sanghvi & Mehrotra, 2022).

It is against this backdrop that the Government of India promulgated the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the country's first comprehensive education policy reform in more than three decades (Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020 is notable among Indian policy instruments for naming mental health explicitly, mandating its inclusion within curricula and situating student wellbeing as a constitutive element of what the policy terms "holistic and multidisciplinary" education. Scholarly assessments of this provision diverge: some read it as a genuine and overdue turning point for mental health within Indian education policy (Chowdhury, 2026), while others note that its wellbeing language is most developed at the school level and attenuates considerably by the time the policy addresses research degrees and postgraduate study. This review is positioned within that unresolved divergence. Rather than attempting an exhaustive account of either the academic-stress literature or the NEP 2020 policy-analysis literature independently, it poses a more targeted question: to what extent can a policy architecture built around structural flexibility and holistic development be expected to reach the specific, well-documented stressors experienced by a doctoral candidate awaiting a delayed stipend, navigating a strained supervisory relationship, or facing an uncertain post-degree career trajectory?

Rationale and Significance

Three reasons make this topic worth revisiting now rather than treating it as settled. First, the timing is genuinely current: NEP 2020 is now several years into implementation, so there is enough distance to ask whether its wellbeing provisions have reached practice, rather than simply summarising policy text. Second, graduate students remain an understudied subgroup within student mental health research, which has historically concentrated on undergraduates; reviews specifically addressing postgraduate populations are comparatively rare and often note this gap themselves (Chi et al., 2023). Third, the practical stakes are high. Poor graduate student mental health is associated with attrition from research careers,

reduced productivity, and, in the most serious cases, active risk to life; institutions that fail to address it lose talent as well as failing a duty of care (Evans et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2022). A review that draws together the policy and the psychological evidence base is therefore of direct use to university administrators, student counselling services, and doctoral supervisors, not only to researchers.

METHODOLOGY OF THE REVIEW

This is a narrative and critical review rather than a systematic review in the PRISMA sense; no formal protocol was registered, and the aim is synthesis and argument rather than exhaustive coverage. Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and search engines for terms combining “graduate students,” “postgraduate,” “PhD,” “academic stress,” “mental health,” “wellbeing,” “higher education” and “NEP 2020” or “National Education Policy 2020.” Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical studies, peer-reviewed reviews and meta-analyses, and the primary NEP 2020 policy text itself. Where global literature was used to establish baseline patterns, Indian and NEP-specific literature was used to ground the discussion in the policy context that motivates this review. The review is necessarily selective: it foregrounds sources that speak directly to graduate or postgraduate populations and to NEP 2020's wellbeing provisions, rather than the much larger literature on undergraduate or school-level mental health.

NEP 2020: What the Policy Actually Says About Wellbeing

NEP 2020 replaced the National Policy on Education of 1986 and was approved in July 2020 by the Union Cabinet, restructuring school stages, renaming the Ministry of Human Resource Development as the Ministry of Education, and setting ambitious targets for gross enrolment in higher education (Government of India, 2020). Its language on mental health appears primarily in the sections dealing with school curricula, where it calls for “basic training in health, including preventive health, mental health, good nutrition, personal and public hygiene” to be woven into foundational and middle-stage learning, alongside guidance on substance use and disaster response (Government of India, 2020).

At the higher-education level, the policy's wellbeing contribution is more indirect. It comes largely through structural reforms that are framed as reducing stress rather than through explicit mental-health provisions: multiple entry and exit points intended to reduce the finality (and therefore the stakes) of any single academic decision, a shift away from rigid streaming between arts, science, and commerce, and a stated commitment to reducing rote-memorisation and high-stakes testing culture. Scholars analysing the policy's mental-health dimensions have argued that this amounts to a genuine, if implicit, wellbeing agenda - one built on flexibility and reduced academic rigidity rather than on counselling infrastructure alone (Chowdhury, 2026).

What is comparatively thin in the policy text is any provision specific to research-based postgraduate education: doctoral supervision practices, funding security for research scholars, structured mentoring, or mental health support tailored to the isolation and evaluative uncertainty that characterise thesis work. The policy's flagship innovations - the four-year undergraduate degree, the Academic Bank of Credits, multidisciplinary universities - are pitched overwhelmingly at undergraduate restructuring. Where PhD education is addressed, the emphasis falls on expanding capacity and multidisciplinary research clusters rather than on scholar wellbeing as such. This is not a criticism unique to NEP 2020; graduate student mental health is frequently absent from national education

policy internationally. But it does mean that any claim that NEP 2020 has already "solved for" graduate student wellbeing needs to be treated with caution.

Conceptual Framework: Academic Stress and Wellbeing

This review draws loosely on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, which frames stress not as a fixed property of an event but as the outcome of an ongoing appraisal process: a student weighs a demand (a thesis deadline, a funding shortfall, a difficult viva) against the resources they believe they have to meet it, and distress follows when the demand is appraised as exceeding those resources. This framework is useful here because it clarifies what a policy like NEP 2020 can and cannot do. Restructuring curricula changes the demands side of the equation - fewer rigid deadlines, more flexible pathways - but does relatively little, on its own, to build the resources side: supervisory support, peer community, financial security, and accessible mental health services. A review of the evidence on graduate student wellbeing therefore needs to look at both halves, and the sections below are organised accordingly: stressors first, then the support structures - policy-driven and institutional - that are meant to offset them.

THEMATIC REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

The scale of the problem among graduate students

The baseline for this discussion is set by the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Surveys, which found that approximately one in five college students across multiple countries met criteria for a diagnosable mental disorder within their first year of study, most commonly anxiety and mood disorders (Auerbach et al., 2016). Graduate student research since then has consistently shown this baseline to be a floor rather than a ceiling once students move into research-based postgraduate training. The global evidence base on graduate student mental health has grown substantially since Evans et al.'s (2018) widely cited survey, which found that graduate students experienced anxiety and depression at rates roughly six times higher than the general population and identified advisor relationships as a major predictor of wellbeing. More recent meta-analytic evidence broadly confirms the scale, if not always the precise magnitude, of this pattern: Chi et al. (2023), synthesising fifty studies and nearly forty thousand participants, estimated that just under thirty-five percent of graduate students experience some level of anxiety, with doctoral students somewhat more affected than master's students, and with prevalence trending upward over time rather than down. Zhang, Litson, and Feldon (2022) extended this line of work by examining social predictors specifically, finding that supervisory relationships, peer support, and a sense of belonging within one's department were consistently associated with wellbeing outcomes among doctoral students, independent of workload alone.

A related but distinct strand of research looks at burnout rather than clinical anxiety or depression. Fiorilli et al. (2022) found that burnout among university students varied by gender and by whether students combined study with paid work, suggesting that graduate students who are also employed - a common arrangement, particularly in humanities and social science disciplines - may carry a compounded burden that generic student-wellbeing surveys can miss. Allen et al. (2022) added a further layer, showing that graduate student burnout was linked to substance use, and that satisfaction with one's advisor moderated this relationship: students with supportive supervisors were less likely to translate burnout into substance use, even when workload itself was comparably high.

The Indian evidence base

Indian data, though less extensive than the global literature on graduate students specifically, tells a broadly consistent story. Shete and Garkal's (2015) study of postgraduate medical students found meaningful levels of stress, anxiety, and depression linked to examinations, workload, and financial responsibility - a combination that will be familiar to graduate students well beyond medicine. Ahmad and Suresh's (2025) large cross-sectional study of young adults in higher education across eight Indian tier-one cities, though weighted toward undergraduates, found that roughly seventy percent of respondents showed moderate to high psychological distress, with postgraduate and doctoral respondents forming a smaller but far from negligible share of the sample; female students and students in central universities reported comparatively higher distress. At the population level, the National Mental Health Survey found that the treatment gap for common mental disorders in India exceeds eighty percent, meaning that the overwhelming majority of individuals who meet criteria for a mental disorder never receive formal care - a systemic shortfall in which students are far from exempt (Gautham et al., 2020). Mehrotra's (2020) overview of Indian higher education and youth mental health situates these findings within a system-level shortage: India's higher education sector enrolls tens of millions of students against a persistent shortage of trained counsellors and campus mental health infrastructure, a gap that is felt most acutely by graduate students, who often have less structured contact with faculty advisors outside their own research supervisor.

This treatment gap is compounded by help-seeking behaviour itself. Sanghvi and Mehrotra's (2022) review of five decades of Indian research on help-seeking for mental health concerns found that stigma, low mental health literacy, and preference for informal over professional sources of support recur as barriers across the studies they examined, regardless of the specific population studied. For graduate students - who are typically older, more geographically mobile, and more removed from family support networks than undergraduates, yet still embedded in a culture where psychological distress is often read as personal or academic failure - these barriers plausibly compound the underlying prevalence figures reported above, suppressing not the presence of distress but its visibility to the institutions meant to respond to it.

Taken together, this body of work supports three observations relevant to this review. First, graduate students are not simply "older undergraduates" from a mental-health standpoint; the stressors that dominate - supervision, funding, publication and evaluation pressure, career uncertainty - are structurally different from coursework-driven undergraduate stress. Second, Indian graduate students appear to face this in a system with comparatively thin institutional mental-health infrastructure and a documented treatment gap, even where national policy has begun to name mental health explicitly. Third, financial precarity recurs across nearly every study cited here as a proximate stressor, which matters directly for how NEP 2020's reforms should be evaluated, since the policy's flexibility-oriented provisions do little to address funding security for research scholars or the stigma-related barriers that keep distressed students from seeking help in the first place.

Where NEP 2020's provisions meet - and miss - graduate student needs

Reading the policy-analysis literature alongside the mental-health evidence base makes the mismatch reasonably clear. NEP 2020's most concrete wellbeing commitments - health and mental-health training folded into curricula, socio-emotional learning, teacher preparedness - are pitched at the foundational, preparatory, and middle stages of schooling (Government of

India, 2020). By the time a student reaches a research degree, the policy's influence is felt mainly through second-order effects: a less rigid pipeline into higher education in principle should mean fewer students entering graduate study already burned out by an unforgiving school and undergraduate system, and multidisciplinary universities in principle offer graduate students access to broader academic communities and support services. Chowdhury (2026) argues that this counts as a genuine, if slow-moving, form of mental health integration, since it treats wellbeing as an outcome of institutional design rather than only of clinical services bolted onto an unchanged system.

The limitation of this reading is that it is aspirational rather than yet demonstrated. None of the graduate-student mental health studies reviewed above measure NEP 2020 implementation directly, because most of the underlying data collection either predates the policy or was not designed to test its effects; the link between the policy and observed outcomes for graduate students is therefore inferential rather than evidenced. What can be said with more confidence is that the specific pressures identified in the empirical literature - supervisory relationships, funding insecurity, publication pressure, career uncertainty after the degree - are barely visible in the policy text itself, which is far more preoccupied with restructuring earlier educational stages and undergraduate degree architecture. A policy can be well-intentioned toward student wellbeing in general and still leave a specific, vulnerable subgroup under-addressed.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Three tensions stand out from this review. The first is a tension between structural and clinical approaches to wellbeing. NEP 2020 largely takes the structural route: reduce rigidity, broaden pathways, and assume that wellbeing follows from a less punishing system. The empirical literature on graduate students, by contrast, points repeatedly to relational and clinical factors - supervision quality, peer support, access to counselling - that a purely structural policy does not directly touch (Zhang et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2022). Both approaches likely matter, but a review of the evidence suggests the policy currently leans further toward the structural end than the graduate-specific evidence would recommend.

The second tension concerns visibility. Undergraduate and school-level wellbeing has an obvious constituency within NEP 2020's drafting process, reflecting the much larger population involved. Graduate students are numerically smaller and institutionally more dispersed - spread across departments, disciplines, and supervisors rather than concentrated in identifiable cohorts - which may partly explain why their specific stressors are underrepresented in policy language even where the policy's general wellbeing intent is genuine.

The third tension is between policy timeline and lived urgency. Structural reforms of the kind NEP 2020 propose take years, arguably a generation, to fully reshape the pipeline of students entering graduate study. Meanwhile, the graduate students currently in the system are navigating supervision, funding, and evaluation pressures now, with the institutional support structures that existed before the policy. This does not make NEP 2020 the wrong policy; it does mean that treating it as a sufficient answer to graduate student mental health risks a gap between confident policy claims and the everyday experience documented in the empirical literature (Ahmad & Suresh, 2025; Mehrotra, 2020).

Recommendations

Based on the evidence reviewed, three sets of recommendations follow.

- **For institutions:** build structured mentoring and supervisory-training programmes specifically for doctoral and postgraduate supervisors, since supervisory relationship quality is one of the most consistent predictors of graduate student wellbeing in the literature reviewed here (Zhang et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2022).
- **For institutions:** extend counselling and mental health services in ways that are accessible to graduate students specifically, who are often dispersed across departments and less likely to encounter campus wellbeing outreach designed with undergraduates in mind (Mehrotra, 2020).
- **For policymakers:** extend NEP 2020's wellbeing language explicitly into postgraduate and doctoral education, addressing fellowship timeliness and funding security, since financial precarity recurs as a stressor across nearly every study cited in this review.
- **For researchers:** prioritise longitudinal and implementation-focused studies that can test, rather than infer, whether NEP 2020's structural reforms are actually improving graduate student wellbeing over time.

Limitations of This Review

This review has the limitations inherent to any narrative synthesis: it is not exhaustive, it reflects the sources located through the search terms used, and it does not apply formal quality-appraisal tools to the studies it draws on. Much of the Indian evidence base is drawn from cross-sectional, single-institution, or discipline-specific studies (particularly medical education), which limits generalisability to graduate students across all fields. Direct empirical evidence connecting NEP 2020 implementation to measured graduate student wellbeing outcomes is, at the time of writing, essentially absent from the published literature, so the policy-evidence link discussed here is necessarily interpretive rather than causal.

CONCLUSION

Graduate students carry a distinct and well-documented mental health burden, shaped by supervision dynamics, funding precarity, and the open-ended uncertainty of research work, and Indian graduate students appear to experience this within a system that still has substantial gaps in dedicated mental health infrastructure. NEP 2020 represents a genuine and, in Indian policy terms, unusually direct acknowledgement that mental health belongs inside education policy rather than outside it. But its concrete wellbeing provisions are concentrated in school and undergraduate education, and its higher-education reforms address graduate student stress mainly by implication rather than by design. Closing that gap will require institutions and policymakers to treat graduate students not as an afterthought within a larger student body, but as a population with its own specific, well-evidenced stressors that deserve equally specific responses.

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Conflict of Interest

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