

For decades, higher education across the globe sold a fairly standard dream: secure admission to a prestigious institution, earn a marketable degree, and move smoothly into employment. Rankings, brand value, and placement statistics were treated as proxies for success.

However, the *Annual Student Quest Report 2025* released by the International College and Career Counselling (IC3) Institute suggests that today's students, across regions and socio-economic contexts, appear to be recalibrating what they expect from higher education and are prioritising well-being, safety, purpose, and long-term relevance over institutional prestige.

This shift reflects a generation coming of age amid overlapping crises: a pandemic that exposed mental health fragilities, economic uncertainty that unsettled linear career paths, rapid technological change that renders skills obsolete faster than degrees can certify them, and a global climate of anxiety shaped by conflict, climate change, and political instability.

In such a context, it is hardly surprising that students ask a different set of questions: Will this institution protect my mental health? Will I feel safe

here? Will my education have meaning beyond short-term employability?

However, this recalibration also exposes a troubling gap between student expectations and institutional preparedness. While over 80% of students reportedly rely on AI-powered tools for career exploration and university selection, a significantly smaller proportion of counsellors use similar technologies. Even more telling is the finding that family members remain students' most trusted advisers. This reliance reflects both cultural realities and systemic inadequacies. Formal guidance structures in many countries, including India, remain under-resourced, sporadic, and exam-centric.

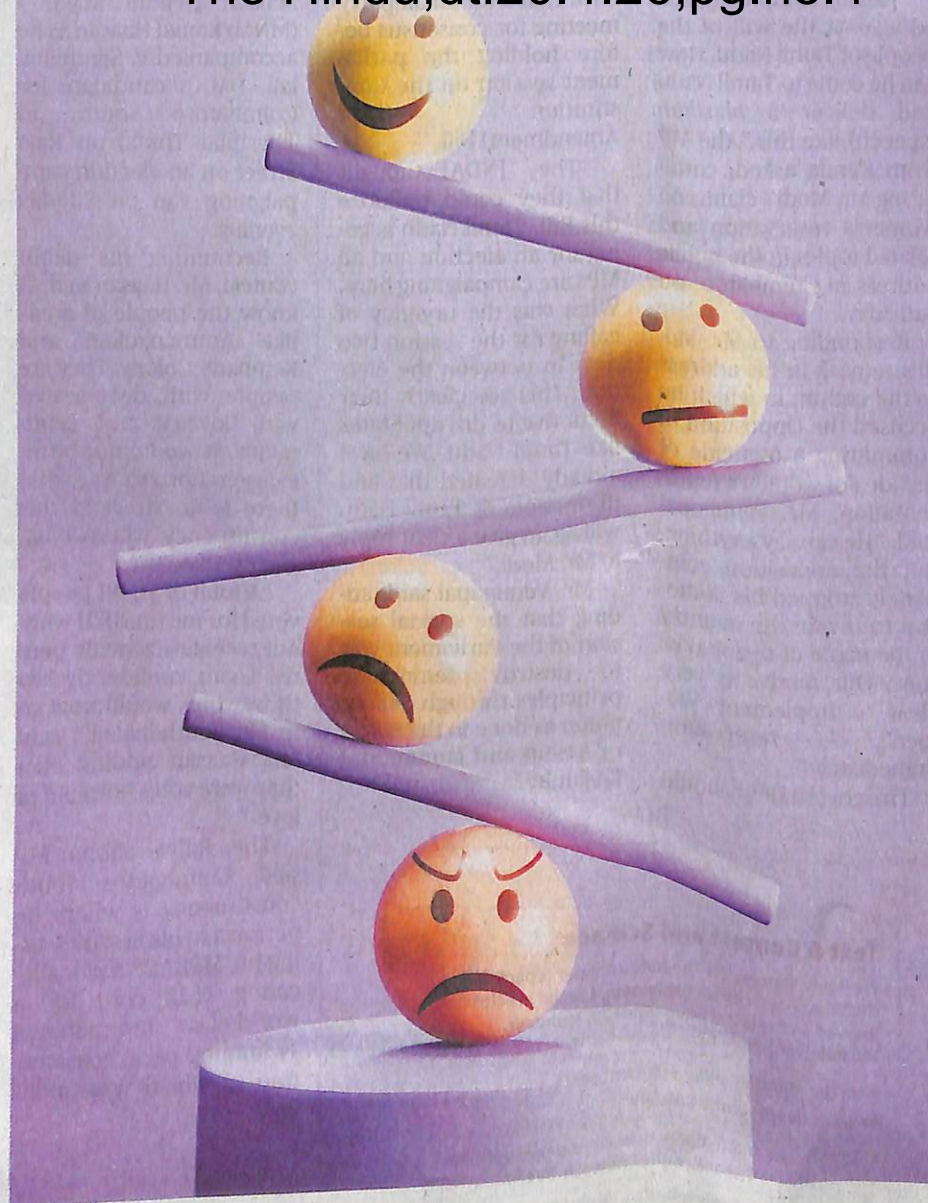
Have students thought this through fully? In part, yes. Their emphasis on well-being and purpose is backed by strong evidence linking mental health to academic success and life outcomes. But there is a danger in over-individualising responsibility. Student preferences alone cannot drive institutional change. The latter requires funding, trained personnel, and a radical shift in academic culture. Without these, well-being risks becoming a slogan rather than a reality.

Indian context

In India, these findings resonate with deep ongoing concerns. Indian campus-

Mind over marks

Why student well-being matters as much as degrees
The Hindu, dt:20.4.26, pg.no.4



es – both elite and state-run – continue to witness alarming reports of student stress, anxiety, and suicide.

Competitive academic cultures, rigid evaluation systems, caste discrimination, financial pressure, and inadequate psychological support form a combustible mix. Against this backdrop, students' insistence on safety and mental well-being is not a choice but a necessity.

However, the feasibility of implementing this student-centred vision in Indian higher education remains contested, primarily because capacity is uneven. While a handful of private and central institutions have begun investing in counselling centres, mentorship programmes, and flexible curricula, the vast majority struggle with basic staffing, infrastructure, and governance deficiencies.

Often, inclination is missing. Mental health is still viewed as peripheral, remedial, or individual rather than institutional and preventive.

In this context, the IC3 report's call for "Counselling as a Culture" is significant. It suggests moving beyond token counsellor appointments towards embedding guidance within pedagogy, leadership practices, teacher training, and parental engagement.

In India, this requires a decisive break from the exam-centric mindset that

dominates schooling and higher education. Faculty members will need training not only in subject expertise but also in student mentorship and emotional literacy.

Additionally, government policy plays a critical role. Regulatory bodies such as the UGC must move beyond issuing advisories and insist on enforceable standards for student support systems. Funding mechanisms should recognise counselling services, mental health infrastructure, and faculty development as core academic investments, not optional add-ons.

Equally important is reducing structural stressors: unrealistic syllabi, compressed academic calendars, punitive assessment practices, and opaque grievance redressal mechanisms.

Institutions, for their part, must confront uncomfortable questions. Do they see students primarily as rank-holders and placement statistics, or as young adults navigating complex personal and social transitions? Are they willing to sacrifice a measure of performative excellence to create humane academic environments? Without such introspection, well-being will remain a policy buzzword rather than an institutional ethic.

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