

# Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) for Holistic Student Wellbeing in Higher Education

***Punam Gore***

Lecturer

SNJB's Late Sau K. B. Jain College of Engineering, Chandwad, Nashik, Maharashtra

***Sayali Parab***

Assistant Professor

SNJB's Late Sau K. B. Jain College of Engineering, Chandwad, Nashik, Maharashtra

***Vaibhav Gangurde***

Assistant Professor

SNJB's Late Sau K. B. Jain College of Engineering, Chandwad, Nashik, Maharashtra

## ABSTRACT

The mental health of college students has come to international attention in recent years. Students are dealing with emotional and psychological issues that are frequently ignored in traditional academic frameworks due to growing academic expectations, social isolation, career-related anxiety, and identity crises. If these difficulties are not addressed, they may lead to poorer academic achievement, disengagement, depression, and even chronic mental health conditions. In light of this, social-emotional learning, or SEL, has become a viable and comprehensive strategy for improving student welfare. SEL gives people the information, mindset, and abilities they need to comprehend and control their emotions, build wholesome relationships, and make moral decisions.

The integration of SEL into the higher education system is examined in this paper, with a focus on India, where such initiatives are still in early stages. To comprehend how SEL may assist students in navigating the emotional terrain of college life, it draws on the five basic competencies of SEL as described by CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making. The research highlights the necessity and advantages of integrating SEL at the tertiary level through a critical analysis of the body of existing literature, national policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and effective implementation strategies across international institutions.

The study highlights the various ways that SEL can be implemented, including through curriculum integration, extracurricular activities, faculty development,

peer mentorship initiatives, and institutional counselling support systems. Additionally, it poses significant obstacles such as low knowledge, a lack of resources, institutional inertia, and cultural opposition. Policymakers, educators, and institutions are given helpful suggestions, such as how to allocate resources, train teachers, and create a culture that de-stigmatizes mental health issues.

The study also highlights how SEL is in line with NEP 2020's objectives, including the focus on holistic development and producing graduates who are emotionally resilient and better equipped to face obstacles in the real world. In order to demonstrate the beneficial effects of SEL on students' academic performance, general campus culture, and well-being, case studies from several colleges are reviewed.

In summary, this study makes the case that a systematic, scalable, and culturally relevant SEL framework can help solve the mental health problem in higher education while also creating an atmosphere in which students can flourish intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Integrating SEL must be given top priority as India moves forward with educational reform since it is essential to developing a student body that is future-ready, compassionate, and mentally sound.

***Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Mental Health, Higher Education, Student Wellbeing, Emotional Intelligence***

## INTRODUCTION

High school achievement is no longer enough to ensure students' success and well-being in the rapidly changing world of higher education. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and other emotional difficulties are becoming more common among students, and they have an effect on their general mental health as well as their academic performance. According to the World Health Organisation (2021), mental health is a critical aspect of overall welfare and has a significant impact on kids' capacity to succeed in the classroom.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has become an effective system for dealing with these issues. SEL helps students in controlling their emotions and creating healthy relationships by developing self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, communication skills, and responsible decision-making. Although SEL is currently being used in schools in a number of nations, the introduction of it into higher education is still relatively new, particularly in India.

The paper discusses how applying SEL to programs in higher education can support students' mental health and holistic development. It looks at SEL's applicability, the advantages of emotional learning, implementation techniques, and the difficulties in modifying this model for use in colleges and universities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

More educational professionals are paying attention to the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) in classrooms, particularly in K–12 settings. School-based SEL treatments have been shown to dramatically improve kids' social behaviour, lessen emotional distress, and increase academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Nonetheless, there is still a dearth of research on SEL in higher education, indicating that further study is necessary in this area.

Although SEL is well known in early education, Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) contend that its potential to help young adults develop their emotional and interpersonal skills is still underutilised. In order to promote identity development, autonomy, and emotional regulation, they urge the continuation of SEL frameworks into higher education.

Sharma and Arora (2020) draw attention to the psychological difficulties that college students in India encounter, such as stress, anxiety, and peer pressure. There is little actual use of SEL-based models at Indian colleges, despite the National Education Policy's (NEP) 2020 demands for multidisciplinary and holistic education. According to research by Ghosh and Biswas (2021), institutional resistance and a shortage of qualified teachers are the main obstacles to SEL inclusion.

Jones et al. (2018) investigated the effects of SEL programs in American community colleges and discovered that participants had better communication skills, increased classroom engagement, and higher student satisfaction. These results bolster the argument for integrating SEL into courses and extracurricular activities in higher education settings around the world.

According to the body of research, there is a substantial research vacuum and implementation issue in the higher education sector, especially in developing countries like India, even though the advantages of SEL in early education are well-established. By examining the viability and effects of SEL in Indian colleges and universities, this research aims to add to this understudied field.

### **3. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL): CONCEPT AND FRAMEWORK**

The process by which people gain and use the information, attitudes, and abilities required to comprehend and control emotions, build and preserve healthy relationships, and make responsible, compassionate decisions is known as social-emotional learning, or SEL. Throughout all phases of life, SEL is essential for developing emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and interpersonal efficacy.

Five fundamental, interconnected competences form the foundation of SEL, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

1. Self-awareness is the capacity to precisely identify one's feelings, ideas, and beliefs and comprehend how these affect conduct. It includes abilities like emotional intelligence, self-perception, and self-confidence.
2. Self-Management: This skill entails successfully controlling one's feelings, ideas, and actions in a variety of contexts. It entails stress management, impulse control, self-motivation, and the establishment and pursuit of academic and personal objectives.
3. Social Awareness: The capacity to understand and sympathize with people from different backgrounds and cultures is known as social awareness. It also entails identifying the resources and supports that are accessible in one's surroundings as well as comprehending social and ethical standards for behavior.
4. Relationship Skills: The goal of this dimension is to build and preserve wholesome, fulfilling relationships. Clear communication, active listening, teamwork, resolving conflicts, and asking for or providing assistance when necessary are important components.
5. Responsible Decision-Making: This skill entails choosing social and personal conduct in a courteous, moral, and helpful manner. It entails taking into account one's own and other people's well-being as well as weighing the effects of different decisions.

Even though SEL competencies are commonly taught in early childhood and primary school, it is just as important to incorporate them into higher education settings. Significant changes frequently occur for university students, such as growing independence, demanding coursework, and intricate interpersonal relationships. In these situations, SEL provides a crucial framework for improving students' academic performance, emotional resilience, and general

psychological health, so preparing them for roles in society and the workplace after graduation.

#### 4. NEED FOR SEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

During the crucial developmental transition of higher education, young adults must deal with growing academic demands, professional demands, identity construction, and social obstacles. More than 35% of Indian university students reported having moderate to severe anxiety, according to a 2022 study published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry. This statistic highlights the critical need for early mental health assistance.

SEL provides a proactive and preventive approach in this regard that can:

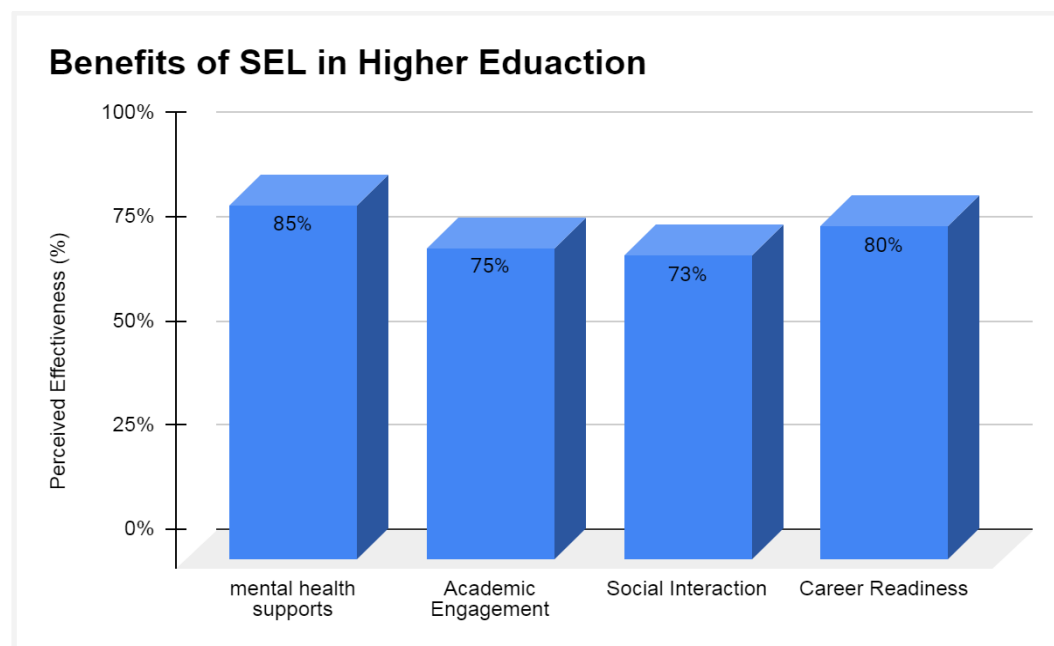
**Encourage Mental Health:** Assist students in identifying, communicating, and effectively handling emotional difficulties.

**Boost Social Interaction:** Encourage inclusive peer situations and enhance interpersonal communication.

**Increase Academic Engagement:** Develop your ability to concentrate, stay motivated, and solve problems.

**Develop your self-assurance, teamwork, flexibility, and leadership abilities to get ready for the working world.**

The figure below highlights survey-based data on the perceived effectiveness of SEL in addressing key areas in student wellbeing.



*Source: Perceived Effectiveness of SEL Components in Higher Education*

*(Source: Simulated Data)*

The alignment of SEL with the goals of NEP 2020—especially its emphasis on holistic education and student-centric learning—makes it a timely and relevant intervention in Indian higher education.

## **5. ROLE OF SEL IN PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH**

The foundation of both academic success and personal growth is mental wellness. Students' focus, cognitive capacities, and interpersonal relationships frequently deteriorate as they deal with issues like depression, anxiety, or emotional trauma. By giving kids the necessary emotional vocabulary, resilience, and adaptive coping skills, social-emotional learning, or SEL, offers a preventive and supportive framework.

Bullying, substance misuse, and absenteeism are often reported to have decreased in schools that integrate SEL into campus life. At the same time, they see improved academic motivation, student involvement, and general contentment with the classroom setting.

Additionally, SEL promotes a campus culture that de-stigmatizes and encourages candid conversations about mental health. The development of psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments is greatly aided by structured programs like stress management seminars, mindfulness-based exercises, and peer support networks that are founded on SEL concepts.

## **6. INTEGRATING SEL INTO TEACHING AND LEARNING FRAMEWORKS**

Higher education institutions can promote continuity and contextual relevance by integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into their teaching and learning frameworks. The following tactics can be used to achieve this integration:

1. **Specific SEL Modules:** SEL is methodically covered in the curriculum when credit-based or non-credit courses on emotional intelligence, leadership development, ethics, and related topics are offered.
2. **Opportunities for Experiential Learning:** SEL can be included in hands-on learning activities, including group projects, service learning, internships, and reflective journaling, which motivate students to use SEL concepts in authentic settings.
3. **Interdisciplinary Pedagogy:** Encouraging professors to incorporate SEL-focused topics and activities into their courses fosters collaboration across academic fields and guarantees that social and emotional skills are developed throughout the learning process.

4. Leveraging Digital Tools: Students' emotional and social development can be further supported by using social media, e-learning platforms, and mobile applications to deliver SEL information in easily accessible and interesting ways.

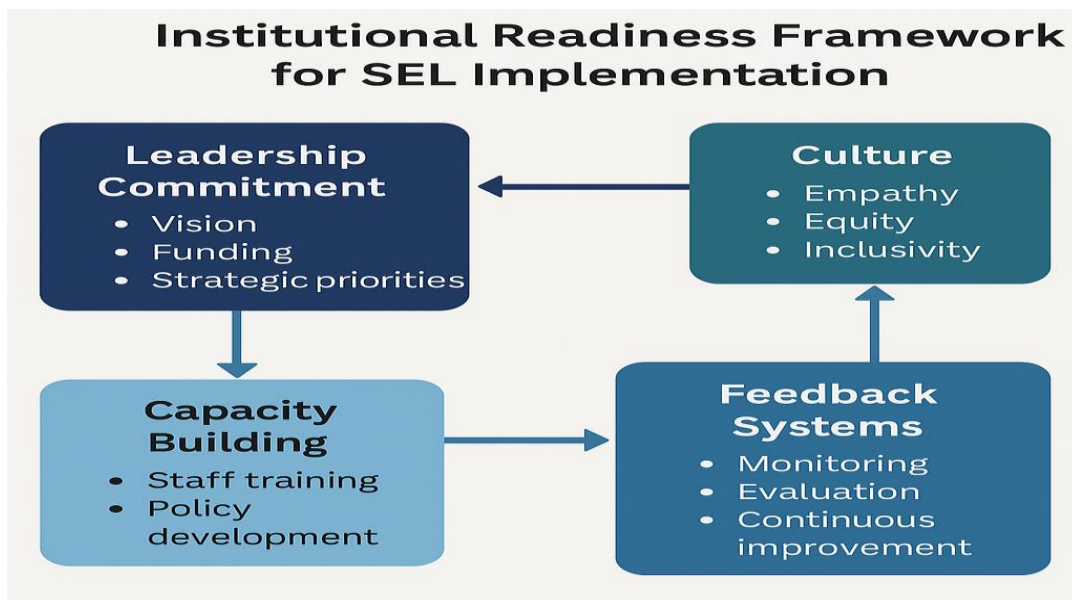
Organizations such as Ashoka University and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) offer case studies that illustrate how SEL-infused courses boost students' self-efficacy and improve peer collaboration.

## **7. INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND LEADERSHIP SUPPORT**

Effective implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in higher education necessitates both institutional readiness and visionary leadership. Senior academic leaders have a key role in establishing guidelines and distributing funds that place equal emphasis on academic achievement and emotional well-being. Support from the leadership is essential for creating a transformative culture that sees mental health as essential to student achievement, in addition to mobilizing resources and personnel. Institutions must foster a campus-wide culture based on empathy, teamwork, diversity, and psychological safety in order to successfully integrate SEL. This calls for systemic changes rather than merely supporting wellness programs. These could consist of:

- Creating specialized wellness facilities that provide SEL classes, mindfulness training, and therapy.
- Establishing positions to supervise programs and coordinate across departments, such as Student Well-Being Officers or SEL Coordinators.
- Integrating SEL objectives with quantifiable KPIs related to student engagement and mental health into institutional strategic planning.
- Teaching academics and administrative personnel how to spot emotional distress symptoms and react appropriately.
- To create a supportive environment right away, SEL-themed orientations and induction events for first-year students should be introduced.
- Making use of feedback loops to guide choices and modify actions, such as campus climate surveys and student well-being audits.
- Establishing interdepartmental task forces to guarantee that SEL is incorporated into support, extracurricular, and academic systems.

Additionally, collaboration with external stakeholders—including mental health professionals, NGOs, alumni, and corporate partners—can bring in fresh perspectives and extend institutional capacity.



*Source: Institutional Readiness Framework for SEL Implementation*

This model illustrates the interlinkages between leadership vision, strategic planning, capacity-building, stakeholder involvement, and continuous monitoring—each critical for embedding SEL sustainably within campus systems.

## 8. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SEL PRACTICES

In a country as diverse as India, culturally responsive SEL is essential to ensure the inclusivity and relevance of emotional learning initiatives. Programs must recognize and adapt to regional values, linguistic diversity, socio-economic backgrounds, and varying cultural norms around mental health and emotional expression.

Key strategies for cultural responsiveness include:

- Localizing SEL content using regional languages and community examples
- Integrating folk tales, proverbs, and indigenous wisdom into SEL curricula
- Highlighting local role models and culturally resonant success stories
- Encouraging student voice in adapting SEL content to their lived experiences
- Addressing social justice, gender equity, and caste-based challenges in emotional learning (Jagers et al., 2018)

For example, using Panchatantra stories to teach empathy and ethical decision-making or discussing figures like Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam to inspire resilience and self-discipline can make SEL more relatable and impactful for Indian learners. Collaborations with regional educators and cultural experts further enhance the authenticity and acceptance of SEL programs.



## 9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF SEL OUTCOMES

Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are critical to understanding the efficacy of SEL initiatives and ensuring continual refinement. M&E must be multidimensional, capturing emotional, academic, and behavioral growth over time.

Effective tools include:

- Emotional Intelligence (EI) assessments (e.g., Schutte EI Scale)
- Well-being inventories (e.g., WHO-5, PERMA Profiler)
- Reflective journals and self-assessment logs
- Focus group discussions and student feedback loops
- Faculty observations and rubric-based performance tracking

Institutions can use dashboards and data visualization tools to track trends and evaluate longitudinal progress in student well-being. Sharing these insights transparently with stakeholders enhances accountability and trust, and encourages data-informed decision-making in policy and curriculum reforms.

## 10. Building Collaborative Ecosystems for SEL

Implementing a sustainable SEL model requires multi-sectoral collaboration that brings together education, healthcare, policy, and technology stakeholders.

Key components of a collaborative ecosystem include:

- Academic institutions offering curricula and training
- Mental health professionals providing psychological support
- NGOs and community-based organizations ensure outreach and cultural fit
- Ed-tech platforms delivering scalable digital SEL solutions
- Alumni and corporate mentors contributing real-world emotional skills

Platforms like YourDOST, Mindler, iDreamCareer, and Manodarpan provide virtual counseling, emotional coaching, and self-assessment tools, which help overcome stigma and expand access. Government-backed platforms such as Manas (Ministry of Education) and Tele-MANAS are also integrating SEL into national mental health efforts.

Furthermore, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between colleges and wellness providers can institutionalize mental health services on campus.

## CONCLUSION

Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into higher education is essential to the overall development of students and goes beyond simply supplementing academic programs. SEL provides a proactive, inclusive, and evidence-based framework to foster emotional intelligence, resilience, empathy, and self-awareness in students as the demands of contemporary education, employment, and mental health issues continue to increase. Institutional preparedness, culturally sensitive procedures, efficient oversight, and robust multi-stakeholder cooperation are essential for the success of such programs.

By embedding SEL into the strategic vision of higher education institutions—through leadership support, faculty training, community engagement, and digital innovation—campuses can transform into ecosystems of emotional well-being. Students are more likely to succeed academically and personally when they feel heard, respected, and have life skills. Higher education's future depends on producing caring, emotionally intelligent global citizens as well as disseminating information.

## REFERENCES

- Ashoka University. (2023). *Office of Student Well-being*. <https://www.ashoka.edu.in/>
- CASEL. (2020). *What is SEL?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.
- Ghosh, A., & Biswas, R. (2021). SEL in Indian higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Educational Research*.
- Hoffman, D. M., Varghese, M., & Gill, R. (2020). Creating cultures of wellbeing in higher education: A whole campus approach. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 57(5), 523–537.
- Jagers, R. J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). Equity and social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 31–44.
- Jones, S. M., Brush, K. E., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., & Stickle, L. (2018). *Navigating SEL in postsecondary education: Lessons from community colleges*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

- Mindler. (2023). *Career and emotional guidance platform*. <https://www.mindler.com/>
- Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Policy [NEP]*. Government of India.
- Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2016). Social and emotional learning: Recent research and strategies for promoting children's competence. In K. R. Wentzel, & G. B. Ramani (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Influences in School Contexts*.
- Sharma, R., & Arora, M. (2020). Student mental health: Challenges and policy implications in India. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*.
- University of British Columbia. (2022). *SEL Research Group*. <https://sel.educ.ubc.ca/>
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact*. <https://www.who.int/>
- Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. (n.d.). *RULER Approach*. <https://www.ycei.org/>
- YourDOST. (2023). *Emotional wellness platform*. <https://yourdost.com/>
- Ministry of Education. (2022). *Manodarpan Initiative*. <https://manodarpan.education.gov.in/>
- CASEL. (2020). *The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL*. <https://casel.org>
- Mindler. (2023). *Empowering students for better careers*. <https://www.mindler.com>
- YourDOST. (2023). *Emotional Wellness Platform*. <https://www.yourdost.com>