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HETL Frontiers

The aim of the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association (referred to as HETL) is to bring together higher education professionals and thought leaders from around the world to dialogue, network, and collaborate on issues relevant to teaching and learning in higher education.

Mental Health and Well-being of Students

Message from the President of the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association (HETL)

Dear HETL members and global education community,

Higher education institutions are places where knowledge is acquired and produced, but they are much more than that. Higher education institutions play a key role in helping learners shape their identities, find a purpose and a sense of their existence, and develop the interpersonal skills and intellectual and emotional capacities required to interact with others. That is why it is crucial to pay attention to students' mental well-being and provide them with the support they need to develop emotionally and socially. This edition of HETL Frontiers is dedicated to discussing student mental health and well-being in the era of transformational changes.

Students' mental well-being has become an important issue today due to factors such as increased academic competition, economic difficulties, digital overload, fragmented societies, and anxieties about an uncertain future. The boundaries between studying, working, living, and communicating in a post-digital age have become very blurred. All these challenges affect learners' ability to pay attention, participate in activities, develop healthy relationships, overcome difficulties, and imagine their futures. Student well-being, therefore, is an important issue in higher education.

Student well-being in higher education requires institutions to create a culture in which students are systematically supported. In many cases, the issue of student mental well-being was associated only with counseling centers. This idea still works; however, it is not enough to address students' well-being and health simply through counseling.

Students' mental state depends on the overall educational environment, including curriculum design, assessments, accessibility of learning, relationships with peers and teachers, expectations, and the institution's culture shaped by policies.

When workloads become overwhelming, expectations are unclear, and student success is measured solely by the student's test scores, priorities may become distorted. It does not mean that academic rigor should be decreased. The point is that academic rigor invites learners to engage in sustained inquiry, disciplined thinking, and creativity.

Compassion and excellence are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to maintain high academic standards and to maintain positive mental health.

A holistic approach to student well-being helps students feel safe and take intellectual risks. A holistic approach entails issues of belonging, dignity, agency, safety, and purpose. Students flourish when they realize they are perceived as people, not simply as numbers.
They will be ready to ask for help when it is viewed without stigma and not as a weakness. They will continue to learn and to develop when they establish relationships of trust with faculty, peers, advisors, and staff.

This culture should be inclusive, since not all students may perceive higher education in the same way. Disability, cultural background, language, race, economic situation, age, familial obligations, migration experience, and previous experiences can significantly influence students' perceptions of academic study and the support system. Some students experience additional barriers and challenges that remain

invisible to other people. Some of them distrust the formal mental health system due to stigma, cultural expectations, previous discrimination, or concern about confidentiality. It is crucial to listen carefully to students' voices and create a support system that is accessible and culturally sensitive.

Technology plays an important role as well. A digital learning environment can provide additional access, flexibility, connection, and continuity. It can cause fatigue, distraction, isolation, surveillance, and the erosion of boundaries between academic work and personal life. Technology is most useful when it fosters relationships, expands access to assistance, and supports students' autonomy.

Faculty members have an important role in the wider ecosystem of care for students' well-being. It does not mean that faculty should be therapists and provide treatment for psychological conditions for which they are not qualified. However, faculty are typically the first ones who notice changes in students' attendance, participation, confidence, or performance. It is important to create positive conditions for students' well-being through clear communication, effective course design, feedback, and referrals. Faculty members should also receive necessary training, realistic expectations, and healthy boundaries. Educational institutions cannot support students' well-being by ignoring educators' well-being.

A key part of institutional learning is knowing how to listen to students. It takes more than just looking at data from student evaluations of teaching. Peer networks, mentoring, and participatory program design are also needed to help institutions discover students' needs. When students influence the design of the support system, the system becomes more effective.

The contributions to this edition help show that student well-being is not separate from education. Well-being is intertwined with teaching, learning, assessments, belonging, and participation in everyday activities. The challenge for higher education institutions is not only to offer additional services but also to analyze the assumptions behind those services and to provide an honest view of the reality of students' lives. This becomes more effective by collaborating with students, faculty, counselors, administrators, researchers, parents, and policymakers.

The measure of an educational institution is not only the knowledge students acquire but also the people they become during their time there. A university committed to well-being does not remove the difficulties that students face in the academic process. Difficulties help build resilience and perseverance, making students stronger and more mature. Institutions should create the conditions in which students can experience difficulty without losing dignity, hope, or a sense of belonging.

Regards

Dr. Patrick Blessinger
President, HETL

Message from the Editor of HETL *Frontiers*

Dear HETL members and global education community

I am delighted to announce the release of the seventh edition of *HETL Frontiers*. This publication continues to explore the vanguard of higher education, with a dedicated focus on innovation, sustainability, and the rapidly shifting landscapes of teaching, research, and service.

This milestone issue is particularly significant as it centers on an urgent global imperative: the holistic well-being and mental health of the contemporary student. In the wake of shifting global landscapes and intensified academic competition, student mental health has moved from the margins of campus life to the very center of educational discourse. As academic pressures mount and the boundaries between digital and physical learning environments blur, the academy faces a critical mandate: to move beyond reactive crisis management toward proactive, inclusive, and sustainable support systems.

This volume features invaluable insights from an international network of distinguished educational leaders and scholars, notably including contributions from several HETL Country Directors.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Patrick Blessinger for his visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to championing HETL as a premier global platform for academic exchange. Furthermore, I extend my gratitude to the HETL Publicity and Promotions Committee, Asst. Prof. Dr. Sameera Saeed, Prof. Taisir Subhi Yamin, Prof. Rakel Kavena Shaleyefu, and Prof. Mojca Kukanja Gabrijelčič, whose exceptional dedication and collaborative efforts were essential in bringing this edition to publication.

Warm regards

Dr. Martina Jordaan
Editor HETL Frontiers

HETL *Frontiers* – Content

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1. Beyond the Crisis: Proactive Institutional Strategies for Student Resilience and Burnout Prevention

by **Anton Rikus de Beer,** Founder and Principal Consultant
STEL-X, Pretoria, South Africa

Introduction

Universities have increasingly invested in counselling services, peer-support initiatives, wellness programmes and broader student well-being structures in response to growing concerns regarding student mental health (Abrams, 2022). These interventions are important, but many students continue to experience stress, anxiety and academic disengagement. Recent research suggests that fear of failure may be one mechanism contributing to these experiences. Duru, Balkis and Duru (2024) found that fear of failure is associated with lower academic satisfaction, with emotion regulation difficulties and procrastination acting as important mediating factors.

Students do not simply fear failure; they fear what failure may mean for who they are, what opportunities remain available to them and whom they might become afterwards. This raises an important question for higher education. Should universities focus only on supporting students once distress occurs, or should learning itself be designed in ways that build resilience before distress becomes overwhelming? This article argues that productive failure, when supported through guided recovery, can help students challenge their current understanding, recover from setbacks, develop judgement and become more resilient.

Why Being Wrong Feels Threatening

Students rarely fear a test, assignment or presentation in isolation. More often, they fear what an unfavourable outcome may mean. A poor mark may be interpreted as evidence of incompetence. Critical feedback may be experienced as a threat to identity. In this way, a failed assessment can become a story about future failure long before any real consequences occur.

Covington's (1992) self-worth theory provides an important explanation for this response. Students frequently associate academic performance with personal worth. When failure is interpreted as evidence of diminished ability, protecting self-worth can become more important than learning itself. Behaviours such as avoidance, perfectionism and procrastination may therefore be understood not simply as a lack of motivation, but as attempts to protect identity.

This matters because meaningful learning often requires uncertainty. Students must encounter unfamiliar problems, test assumptions, recognise gaps in their current understanding and revise their thinking. If these experiences are interpreted as threats to self-worth rather than part of learning, students may

avoid the very situations that develop resilience and deeper understanding.

How Should Higher Education Respond?

If meaningful learning requires students to challenge their existing understanding, then higher education has a responsibility to create learning environments where this can occur safely and constructively. Grant (2021) argues that intellectual growth depends not simply on acquiring knowledge, but on the willingness to question existing beliefs, rethink assumptions and update one's understanding when confronted with new evidence. Learning therefore becomes a process of refining mental models rather than merely accumulating correct answers.

Professional practice rarely presents problems exactly as they appeared in a textbook. Graduates must first determine whether a challenge can be addressed using established knowledge or whether it requires them to question assumptions, integrate new information and develop a different approach. Developing this judgement may be one of the most valuable outcomes of higher education. Students should therefore be challenged not only to reproduce correct answers, but also to recognise when familiar solutions no longer apply.

Kapur (2008) formalised the concept of productive failure as an instructional approach in which students initially grapple with complex problems before receiving formal instruction. Importantly, productive failure should not be understood as simply allowing students to fail. Failure, in isolation, is not inherently educational. Learning emerges from the support that follows the initial challenge, enabling students to understand why their approach did not achieve the intended outcome and how their thinking can be refined.

One way of thinking about this support is as guided recovery. Instead of treating an unsuccessful outcome as the end of learning, educators help students analyse the outcome, identify the assumptions or reasoning that contributed to it, reflect on alternative approaches and apply that learning in a subsequent attempt. The educational value lies not in the setback itself, but in the opportunity to investigate it, understand it and recover from it with greater insight than before.

Recent higher education research increasingly recognises the role of failure as a learning tool. Rawle, Laliberté and Guadagnolo (2025) argue that learning through failure contributes to resilience, reflection and long-term intellectual development. These findings suggest that failure should not be viewed only as an outcome to be avoided. Instead, it can be understood as a source of information. It reveals gaps in understanding, exposes assumptions that require refinement and provides opportunities for growth that success alone cannot offer.

Productive Failure as a Pathway to Student Resilience

This principle became particularly clear during my engineering education. Some of the most memorable lessons took place in the structural laboratory, where beams were loaded until they failed. The objective was never simply to observe failure. It was to understand the mechanism of failure: where it initiated, what assumptions influenced the behaviour, which factors governed the outcome and how the design could be refined to perform differently under the required loading conditions.

One lesson has remained with me throughout my professional career. We were never taught that a beam should never fail. We were taught that a beam should not fail under the conditions for which it was designed. Understanding those conditions, recognising the limits of a design and engineering appropriate

safety margins became far more valuable than simply memorising design equations.

Perhaps higher education should adopt a similar philosophy. Assessment should not merely determine whether an answer is correct or incorrect. It should help students understand the consequences of their reasoning, identify the assumptions that influenced their decisions and provide structured opportunities to refine their thinking. In some disciplines, this may involve laboratories, design studios, simulations, clinical placements or case-based learning. Technologies such as virtual reality may expand these possibilities, but they are only one tool. Each field should identify its own safe spaces where students can explore uncertainty and recover from setbacks.

Ultimately, productive failure is not about creating more opportunities for students to fail. It is about intentionally designing educational experiences in which failure becomes recoverable, understandable and instructive. Students do not become resilient because they experience failure; they become resilient because they repeatedly discover that they can recover from it. That capacity to recover, rethink and continue learning may be one of the most valuable attributes higher education can cultivate in graduates facing an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

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2. From Anxiety to Agency in Communication Skills: A Confidence Literacy Model for Proactive Student Well-being

by **Dr Katrina Kinsella,** lecturer, Higher Colleges of Technology, United Arab Emirates

Introduction: From Preparation to Paralysis

One student says they are not ready to speak in front of the class. The teacher has already helped them prepare, modelled presentations, and provided structures, skills, language, and practice time. With friendly encouragement, the student stands up to present to the class. But their gaze lowers, hands tremble, cheeks flush, voice shakes. The first few memorised lines are followed by hesitations and repetitions as they try to remember the next rehearsed line. The rest of the talk is read aloud from the phone as the student speeds through a nightmare, head down.

Preparation wasn't enough.
Worse still, this could all be repeated at the next assessment or semester.

This scenario is all too real for students across diverse contexts, including second-language communication and differing physical and neurological abilities. Anticipatory stress, rumination, and performance-related anxiety commonly accompany academic public speaking. Whether presentations, interviews, answering in class, speaking to another student, or even walking into a lecture hall, communication apprehension remains a well-documented and persistent challenge across higher education contexts (Lintner and Belovecová, 2024; McCroskey, 1977), with consequences beyond performance quality, such as impaired decision-making and avoidance of communication situations (Brooks and Schweitzer, 2011).

Rethinking Communication Anxiety in Higher Education

In higher education, communication competence is widely recognised as important for academic success, future employability, and broader participation. While students may develop confidence through approaches such as repeated, supported exposure (Kaewmak et al., 2011), this article focuses on the explicit instruction of emotional, physiological, social, and cognitive processes that also shape how students experience and respond to communication under pressure.

Confidence literacy is defined here as the capacity to understand, interpret, regulate, and intentionally respond to the internal and external factors that influence confidence in communication. The construct is informed by theories of public speaking anxiety (Bodie, 2010), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), and narrative identity (McAdams, 1995) and AI-mediated support (Isotalus et al, 2025), which together provide the conceptual foundations for the proposed framework. Through this lens, confidence is viewed as a learnable skill set comprising knowledge, awareness, regulation, reflection, and communication practice. This approach shifts attention from simply encouraging students to "be confident" through "practice, practice, practice." to explicitly teaching the skills and understandings that support confident communication.

Bodie (2010) frames both the problems and the solutions for public speaking anxiety within a multifactorial model. According to Bodie, communication skills training, a staple for teachers, is one solution to low perceived knowledge and confidence. However, physiological arousal, or the physical fear response, requires regulation, such as through breathing exercises. Fear of failure, or negative appraisal, requires cognitive reframing (from "I can't do this" to "how I can do this"), and avoidance calls for gradual, repeated exposure (e.g. desensitisation and "practice, practice, practice"). While these approaches are well-established, they may be applied as discrete interventions rather than being rooted in everyday teaching practice.

A Conceptual Confidence Literacy Framework

This article presents a conceptual, practice-informed framework that draws on and synthesises literature on communication apprehension, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and physiological regulation, including Bodie's multifactorial model of public speaking anxiety. It proposes confidence literacy as a pedagogical lens for understanding the development of student communication. The framework is currently being implemented within a first-year spoken communication course and is the subject of ongoing empirical investigation.

The conceptual model is emerging as a pedagogical micro-skills framework, particularly in contexts where anxiety responses to communication are left implicit within teaching. It aims to integrate awareness and regulation into everyday, repeated classroom practice. Central to this model is the understanding that experiences of fear are not signs of failure or fixed traits but can be understood and adapted through practice and awareness. It involves understanding why fear occurs (or doesn't for some), recognising how and when it may manifest, and developing skills to respond to it intentionally. In this sense, students can begin to develop agency: they learn how their responses operate, how to regulate them, and how to act with intention in communicative situations (Bandura, 1997).

From Concept to Practice: Designing and Delivering the Course and Framework

The Confidence Literacy Framework has been integrated into the design and delivery of a first-year spoken communication course at a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. Data collection is currently underway; as such, this article does not report research findings but instead outlines the conceptual foundations of the framework and its pedagogical application prior to empirical evaluation. The students have mostly had little or no prior communication skills training in high school. Furthermore, the first-years find themselves in a co-educational environment, often for the first time, where speaking publicly in such contexts is not just uncomfortable but can be considered culturally inappropriate. In design, confidence was a key issue throughout the course. Here are a few examples:

Confidence literacy: Lessons were created with an explicit focus on confidence. For example, explorations of physical responses to fear, the impact of body posture on confidence, and the language to use when anxious. Within the classes, these were extended through activities such as case studies, role-plays, and silent acting. When preparing for assessments such as presentations, knowledge and skills were developed through repeated cycles of practice and re-teaching, integrating body, voice and cognition. Students were given the opportunity to build awareness of patterns and intentionally apply strategies. Over time, this could develop self-efficacy, making confidence actionable.

Relational capabilities: From the very first class, students were encouraged to engage with and respond to one another through simple communicative activities and, later, through peer feedback. The focus was on how they interpreted, empathised with, and supported their peers in communicative contexts. Activities included encouraging active listening and giving structured peer feedback, with an emphasis on constructive language and clear frameworks to guide interaction. These experiences gave students the opportunity to recognise that others may experience anxiety differently.

Physiological regulation: Embedded regularly in classes were breath awareness and structured voice exercises focusing on volume, pace, and pausing, encouraging students to notice the link between breath and rising anxiety (e.g. increased pace as a stress signal). Drawing on principles of autonomic regulation (Porges, 2011), these adapted vocal practices may support self-regulation and greater composure and clarity in communication.

Reflection: Through weekly written reflections that culminated in a final video reflection, students had the space to notice what they had learned and how their thinking and performance were shifting. Drawing on ideas of cognitive reappraisal (Gross, 1998) and narrative reframing (McAdams, 1993), this process moves students away from simply judging performances as "good" or "bad" and toward making sense of them over time. Students may have gradually started to see themselves differently, beyond immediate performance moments.

AI-Mediated Confidence Literacy: Emerging AI technologies were embedded in the course alongside teacher-led and self-led learning. This presented new opportunities for developing confidence literacy as AI may serve as a reflective partner that enables learners to rehearse communication, receive immediate formative feedback, recognise physiological and behavioural patterns, and engage in structured self-reflection (Isotalus et al, 2025). GPTs were designed to integrate with assessment preparation, and students were encouraged to repeatedly practice with them and receive AI feedback alongside human practice. Classroom activities were used to avoid overuse or scripting by AI, and these concepts were embedded into assessment rules and rubrics. AI has the potential to scaffold the development of confidence literacy alongside the central role of human relationships, authentic interaction, and educator guidance in communicative development.

Conclusion: From Managing Performance to Developing Agency

In conclusion, explicitly teaching and practising confidence as a literacy in spoken communication could prove to be highly beneficial. By offering a proactive and integrative approach that embeds awareness of multiple interacting factors within everyday teaching, students may begin to recognise, interpret, and respond to their own needs and realities. In this way, confidence literacy could reframe spoken communication not as a test of courage, but as a teachable pathway from anxiety to agency.

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3. From Performance-based Funding to Student Burnout: Parallel Pressures in the Contemporary University

by **Blessing Oghogho Otulu,** Assistant Lecturer and PhD candidate, University of Benin, Nigeria.

and **Dr Joshua Sarpong**, Higher Education researcher and Doctoral Evaluation Specialist, University of Auckland, New Zealand

and **Dr Wisdom Oghosa Iyekekpolo**, Researcher and Doctoral Evaluation Specialist, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Introduction

Universities across the world have undergone profound transformation as systems of measurement, accountability and competition have become central to their governance. Since the 1980s, performance-based funding and audit mechanisms have reshaped how institutions define value and allocate resources. These reforms are often justified as tools for improving transparency and efficiency, yet they have also altered the internal cultures of universities in ways that extend far beyond managerial processes. Academic work is increasingly quantified through indicators such as research outputs, completion rates and employability statistics, creating environments where measurable performance becomes the dominant language of institutional life.

Although much scholarship has examined how these systems affect academic staff (Sarpong, 2023; Sarpong and Adelekan, 2024), far less attention has been paid to how performance cultures shape the everyday experiences of students. This article argues that the pressures generated by performance-based governance do not stop at the level of institutional management. Instead, they flow through the university and structure the learning environments students inhabit. Consequently, students encounter

parallel pressures that mirror those experienced by academics, contributing to heightened anxiety, stress and burnout. Understanding these dynamics requires situating student well-being within the broader political economy of modern higher education.

The rise of performance culture in modern universities

Performance-based funding has become a defining feature of higher education reform in many national systems. Under such models, the allocation of public resources is based on quantifiable outputs, including research productivity, graduation rates, the ability to attract funding, employability outcomes and university rankings. Comparative studies have shown that such systems reshape institutional behaviour by encouraging measurable performance and competition (Jongbloed and Vossensteyn, 2016). As universities align themselves with performance indicators, managerial oversight intensifies, and institutional priorities shift toward what can be counted. These mechanisms reconstruct academic identities and labour practices that often privilege output over academic autonomy.

These funding arrangements are embedded within broader audit cultures that valorise rankings and visible excellence. Scholars have described this environment as one in which academics are increasingly subject to “governing by numbers” (Shore and Wright, 2017). Institutional strategic plans prioritise key performance indicators, departments track outputs, and individuals are evaluated against measurable targets. Over time, such practices generate a prevalent atmosphere in which worth is equated with quantifiable achievement. This cultural shift affects not only institutional management but also everyday expectations within classrooms and student services.

Although much of the literature has focused on academic staff, the cultural effects of performance systems inevitably extend to students as well. When institutional reputation and funding depend on retention, completion and graduate outcomes, students themselves become central performance indicators. Their grades, progression rates and employment routes are woven into institutional reporting frameworks.

The internalisation of performance models by students

Research on student mental health suggests that high-performance climates can foster perfectionism, fear of failure and emotional exhaustion. Although these studies often focus on specific populations, they point to broader patterns linking performance pressure to psychological strain. When students internalise institutional expectations, academic achievement becomes closely tied to identity and self-esteem. Ranking systems, public recognition of top performers and competitive learning environments further normalise comparison with peers. These dynamics mirror the pressures experienced by academic staff, revealing a shared vulnerability within contemporary universities.

The psychological consequences of these environments are increasingly visible. Surveys across multiple systems report rising levels of stress, anxiety and burnout among students (Lipson et al., 2022). While individual coping strategies matter, explanations that focus solely on personal resilience obscure the structural conditions shaping student experiences. If universities privilege constant productivity and measurable success, then student exhaustion may reflect systemic expectations rather than individual shortcomings. Understanding student burnout, therefore, requires examining the governance regimes that structure institutional life.

Institutional mediation and policy implications

The relationship between performance culture and student well-being is mediated by institutional context. Not all universities enact performance regimes in the same way. Some institutions temper accountability mechanisms with strong pastoral systems, collaborative pedagogies and explicit

commitments to holistic development. Where academic staff are supported rather than solely evaluated, they may be better positioned to create learning environments that prioritise curiosity and growth. In contrast, institutions where managerial imperatives dominate may transmit performance pressures more directly to students through intensified assessment and limited support structures.

Recognising the structural roots of student burnout has significant policy implications. Many universities have expanded counselling services and resilience programmes in response to rising mental health concerns. While these interventions are valuable, they risk addressing symptoms rather than underlying causes. If funding and accountability systems incentivise ever-increasing performance demands, then policymakers must consider how these external pressures shape internal cultures. Accountability mechanisms are never neutral; they embed assumptions about what counts as value and success.

At the institutional level, leaders can critically reflect on how performance indicators are used. Are assessment practices designed primarily to generate data or to enhance learning? Do strategic communications present excellence as relentless achievement or as a balanced pursuit of intellectual and personal development? By interrogating these questions, universities can cultivate governance models that acknowledge and mitigate the human costs of continuous performance.

Conclusion

The contemporary university is shaped by powerful systems of measurement and competition. Performance-based funding and audit cultures have redefined institutional priorities and intensified pressures on academic staff. Yet these pressures do not remain confined to academic workloads. They permeate the student experience, generating parallel burdens that contribute to anxiety and burnout. Students internalise the performance imperatives embedded in institutional structures, often interpreting academic outcomes as reflections of personal value.

Addressing student well-being, therefore, requires more than individualised interventions. It demands critical engagement with the governance regimes that structure university operations. By recognising the interconnectedness of staff and student experiences, universities can aspire to cultivate forms of excellence that are sustainable, inclusive and attentive to the psychological well-being of their communities.

Authors declaration

We confirm that all content submitted is our original work and does not infringe on any copyright, intellectual property or confidentiality obligations.

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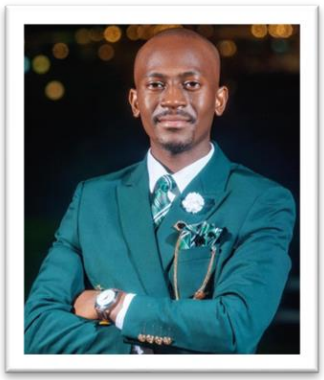
4. Branding Care: Applying Marketing Principles to Promote Student Mental Health and Resilience in Higher Education



by **Simangaliso Bayabonga Zulu**, Lecturer, STADIO Higher Education, School of Administration and Management, South Africa

Introduction

Student mental health has become a defining challenge in contemporary higher education. Rising academic pressures, financial strain, and the lingering effects of global disruptions have contributed to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and disengagement among students (World Health Organization, 2022). While institutions have expanded counselling and crisis-support services, these interventions are often reactive and insufficient to address the systemic nature of student well-being.

As such, this article argues that marketing principles, particularly those related to branding, engagement, and value creation, offer a valuable framework for promoting student mental health proactively. By reframing marketing as a student-centred and relational practice rather than a purely promotional tool, institutions can embed care into the design of learning environments. This approach, conceptualised as "branding care," emphasises alignment between institutional promises and students' lived experiences.

Methodological Approach

This study adopts a conceptual, theory-building approach to examine the role of marketing in advancing student mental health in higher education. It draws on a structured review and synthesis of interdisciplinary literature spanning service-dominant logic, brand experience theory, and transformative service research. Relevant academic sources on student well-being, higher education systems, and marketing were analysed to identify recurring themes and gaps. These insights were thematically integrated to develop the "branding care" framework. The approach is interpretive in nature, aiming to extend existing theory and offer a coherent conceptual model for practice and future research.

Moving Beyond Crisis-Oriented Models

Institutional responses to student mental health have traditionally focused on individualised support services such as counselling and referrals. While essential, these interventions are typically activated only after distress has escalated. This reactive approach often overlooks the broader institutional conditions that influence well-being.

Research by Bennett and Hubble (2021) highlighted that student mental health is shaped by factors such as curriculum design, assessment practices, and institutional culture. For example, poorly structured assessments and unclear communication can contribute to unnecessary stress. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards integrated institutional strategies that prioritise well-being across the student experience rather than isolating it within support services.

Reframing Marketing as a Student-Centred Approach

Marketing in higher education is often associated with recruitment and branding campaigns. However, contemporary marketing theory emphasises relationship building, stakeholder engagement, and value co-creation (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021). At its core, marketing seeks to understand stakeholder needs and design experiences that create value.

Applied to higher education, this perspective positions students as active participants in a service ecosystem. A marketing-informed approach enables institutions to identify pain points in the student journey that may negatively affect well-being. For instance, feedback mechanisms and student analytics can reveal patterns of disengagement linked to workload or administrative inefficiencies. Addressing these issues can improve both student satisfaction and mental health outcomes.

Branding Care and Institutional Trust

Branding is not merely about visual identity or messaging; it is shaped by consistent experiences over time. In higher education, students form perceptions of institutional care through everyday interactions, including lecturer responsiveness, clarity of communication, and administrative efficiency.

“Branding care” refers to the alignment between institutional commitments to student well-being and the realities students encounter. When institutions fail to deliver on these commitments, trust may be eroded. Conversely, consistent and authentic demonstrations of care strengthen institutional credibility.

Trust is a key determinant of student engagement and help-seeking behaviour. Students are more likely to access support services when they perceive their institution as supportive and responsive. From a marketing perspective, trust is built through consistency, transparency, and authenticity, which are considered core elements of strong brand relationships.

Enhancing Engagement Through Strategic Communication

Effective communication is central to promoting student well-being. Despite the availability of support services, many students remain unaware of them or hesitate to seek help. Marketing scholarship emphasises that communication effectiveness depends on relevance, clarity, and timing in shaping stakeholder engagement and response (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021; Keller, 2020). Applying these insights, higher education institutions can move beyond generic awareness campaigns towards more targeted and student-centred communication strategies that resonate with diverse student needs.

Institutions can apply these principles by embedding well-being messaging into academic touchpoints rather than relying solely on standalone campaigns. For example, lecturers can integrate well-being check-ins into lectures, and digital learning platforms can provide timely reminders about support

services during high-stress periods. In addition, assignment briefs can include a short “well-being note” outlining expected workload, time management guidance, and reassurance around available support, thereby normalising help-seeking as part of the academic process rather than as a last resort.

Segmentation strategies can further enhance communication effectiveness. Different student groups have distinct needs; first-year students may require guidance on adjustment, while senior students may face career-related stress. Tailoring communication to these needs can improve engagement and accessibility.

Building Resilience Through Experience Design

Resilience is often framed as an individual attribute, but it is also shaped by environmental and institutional factors. A marketing perspective emphasises experience design, which focuses on creating supportive and meaningful interactions. Practical interventions include balanced assessment scheduling, clear feedback mechanisms, and accessible digital platforms. These design elements can reduce stress and foster a sense of control among students. Research indicates that supportive learning environments contribute significantly to student resilience and academic success (Worsley et al., 2022). By focusing on experience design, institutions can move beyond reactive support and create conditions that enable students to thrive.

Operationalising “Branding Care” in Higher Education Systems

Leading universities demonstrate that student well-being is most effective when embedded across institutional systems rather than confined to support units. At University College London, this is implemented through a coordinated, institution-wide strategy that integrates academic staff, student services, and referral pathways, ensuring care is consistently accessible. University of Melbourne operationalises well-being through experience design, including balanced assessments, clear academic communication, and structured curricula that reduce stress proactively. At Arizona State University, early alert systems and data-informed outreach enable timely intervention, strengthening trust and brand credibility through responsive engagement. These examples illustrate how service ecosystems, experience design, and consistent delivery translate institutional care into lived student experiences (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021; Worsley et al., 2022).

However, persistent underutilisation of support services highlights a disconnect between provision and experience (World Health Organization, 2022). Fragmented systems, unclear processes, and generic communication weaken engagement, signalling a failure of the service ecosystem and poor experience design. Consequently, institutional claims of care lack authenticity, undermining trust and brand strength. This underscores that “branding care” depends on the seamless integration of systems, experiences, and communication to ensure care is visible, accessible, and consistently experienced.

Ethical and Inclusive Considerations

Applying marketing principles to student mental health necessitates careful ethical consideration, as there is a risk that well-being initiatives may be driven by institutional objectives such as retention rather than genuine concern for students; a “branding care” approach therefore positions well-being as an intrinsic value rather than an instrumental outcome (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021). Inclusivity is equally critical, as students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds experience well-being differently; marketing tools such as segmentation can support more responsive and equitable interventions by recognising these differences and avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches (Worsley et al., 2022).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Adopting a “branding care” approach requires higher education institutions to move beyond fragmented initiatives and embed student well-being across academic, administrative, and support systems as a core strategic priority. This integration ensures that care is consistently experienced throughout the student journey rather than treated as a peripheral service. In doing so, institutions must also broaden their measures of success to include relational indicators such as student trust, sense of belonging, and perceived care, aligning with marketing concepts of relationship quality and offering a more holistic view of student experience. Crucially, academic staff remain central to this process, as their teaching practices, communication styles, and responsiveness directly shape how care is perceived; therefore, sustained investment in staff development, training, and supportive institutional policies is essential to embed and maintain a genuine culture of care.

Conclusion

Student mental health is a complex and pressing issue that requires more than reactive interventions. This article has demonstrated that marketing principles can provide a valuable framework for promoting well-being in higher education. By focusing on engagement, experience design, and trust, institutions can move towards proactive and preventative approaches. Branding care is not about managing perceptions but about ensuring that institutional practices consistently reflect a commitment to student well-being. In doing so, higher education institutions can create environments where students are supported, resilient, and able to succeed.

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5. Use of the Delphi Method to Sustain Diverse Stakeholder Voices in the Development of a Neuroinclusion Maturity Framework for Engineering Higher Education

by **Dr Jo-Anne Tait,** Principal Lecturer, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland

and **Dr Beverley Gibbs** from the Engineering Professors Council

and **Stella Fowler** from the Engineering Professors Council

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Introduction

Engineering and computer science education in the UK faces a critical inflection point. While universities strive to modernise curricula and widen participation, a vital dimension of equity remains under-examined: neuro-inclusion. Neurodivergent students, including those with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism-related conditions, are present in every cohort, yet they frequently navigate rigid, non-student-centred pedagogies. Because neurodivergence is largely invisible, these students often face profound stigma and systemic barriers rather than effective pedagogical support (Bolhari and Bielefeldt 2026).

To address these inequities, we conducted a multi-university project across 32 institutions to co-design a discipline-specific neuro-inclusion maturity framework. This project aimed to move beyond generic EDI toolkits by creating a robust self-assessment tool structured around four maturity levels and seven operational domains.

Methodology: Participatory Co-design and the Delphi Method

Developing a subject-specific equity tool requires balancing systemic rigour with the authentic lived experiences of the community it serves. Traditional frameworks often prioritise administrative convenience, diluting the voices of those most impacted by exclusionary practices. We adopted the Delphi method, a structured, iterative consensus-generating technique that allows a group of individuals as a whole to deal with a complex problem, (Linstone and Turoff 1975). It is generally operationalised through successive questionnaires. Our adoption of this methodology sought to sustain and preserve the student voice in a phased approach.

The project engaged over 100 participants stratified into three constituencies: neurodivergent engineering students, engineering academics, and professional services staff. We recruited participants in an open call through the Engineering Professors' Council.

Phase 1 (Summer 2024): A collaborative in-person scoping workshop, to map existing institutional practices, and identify what 'good' looks like, and to discuss pervasive barriers.

Phase 2 (Early-Mid 2025): Two iterative rounds of an electronic Delphi process, via MS Forms, to facilitate consensus on the framework's parameters and descriptors in the framework.

The Delphi method allowed us to analyse responses within and from each constituency separately to understand different perspectives and priorities, and in particular stopped the student voice being 'drowned out'. This prevented a statistical "blending" of conflicting viewpoints. By maintaining parallel analytical streams, we allowed students to articulate frustrations regarding unmet needs while permitting staff to ground operational descriptors in administrative realities.

In managing the Delphi process, we adhered to established methodological standards, acknowledging that while participant numbers are important, the expertise of the panel is more so. We navigated decisions on consensus thresholds (typically 50-97%) and participant selection for subsequent rounds, ultimately ensuring that our methodological boundaries actively sustained equity.

Data and Participation

In the survey design, we set validity parameters of 50% response rate and 75% agreement sentiment. Round 1 achieved an overall response rate of 52%. Feedback highlighted the challenges of co-design; one student noted: "The survey has no questions, just 'Levels'. It was up to me to decipher what the question was." This underscores the necessity and challenge of clear communication when engaging diverse stakeholders in complex academic or service design discourse. Ahead of Round 2, the framework was translated into 'plain English' by a professional editor.

Systemic Barriers and Subject-Specific Context

One of our open questions entering this research was to understand whether engineering requires a subject-specific approach. Our conclusion is that for a number of reasons it does:

Structural Constraints: Engineering carries an intense reliance on group work, rigid professional accreditation, and frequent transitions between disparate environments (e.g., makerspaces vs. lecture halls) (Engineering Council 2020).

The "Professional" Paradox: Staff often evoke their perception of harsh industrial environments under the guise of "professional preparation," applying workplace pressures without the coaching or feedback loops that, in the workplace, would serve to support neurodivergent engineers.

Cognitive Diversity: While engineering thrives on the creative, practical mindsets common among neurodivergent individuals (dyslexia is estimated to be three times more common in engineering than in the general public (Chrysochoou et.al., 2022)), current pedagogical structures create unnecessary friction points, such as ambiguous instructions and scaffolded peer assessments.

Navigating Stakeholder Tensions

Early in the Delphi process, a significant philosophical divide emerged regarding the language used to define institutional performance.

Students strongly argued that the lowest performance tier should be explicitly labelled as "legal non-compliance." They viewed this as a necessary validation of their experiences, arguing that softer administrative language serves as "institutional gaslighting" that obscures systemic failure. In contrast, professional services participants argued that such terminology would hinder sector-wide adoption, in that universities at lower maturity stages would reject the framework as a reputational risk rather than using it as a tool for improvement. This was ultimately resolved with an alternate low tier wording of 'Confirmation of Work Underway', agreed in Delphi round 2.

Conclusion and Impact

The resulting neuro-inclusion maturity framework offers a profound contribution to higher education by demonstrating that student-centred design benefits the entire academic community. By shifting the perspective from treating neurodivergence as an individual "problem" to recognising it as an aspect of the educational ecosystem, the framework promotes better assessment design, structured group work, and smoother learning transitions.

Ultimately, the successful execution of this project proves that methodologically robust, equity-focused research can bridge the gap between policy and human dignity and that the Delphi method is a useful and appropriate tool (if resource-intensive) for carrying out such projects. By sustaining diverse voices through independent evaluation, we have created a scalable model for institutional self-assessment across the UK. Strengthening neuro-inclusion does more than support vulnerable learners; it enriches the engineering profession, ensuring that future technological systems are designed by a fully representative, cognitively diverse community of thinkers.

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6. Addressing the Emotional Impact of Independent Learning Through Structured Support

by **Dr Katrina Forbes-McKay,** Associate Professor in Psychology, School of Law and Social Sciences, at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland

and **Dr Pauline Bremner**, Associate Professor, lectures in Retail and Fashion Management at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland.

Abstract

Universities increasingly seek proactive approaches to support student well-being, yet well-being initiatives and independent learning (IL) development have typically been addressed separately. Our research shows that these areas clearly overlap. Indeed, the conceptual ambiguity around IL generates uncertainty, frustration and overwhelm, directly affecting students' mental well-being and contributing to a self-perpetuating cycle of overprescription and dependence. By clarifying what IL entails and providing explicit, phased scaffolding, institutions can reduce emotional strain, strengthen autonomy and confidence, and support more sustainable learning. This integrated perspective positions IL not only as a pedagogical issue but as a key contributor to students' overall well-being.

Mental Health and Well-being

Student mental health is a growing concern within higher education, and universities are under increasing pressure to move beyond reactive support services and adopt proactive, preventative approaches. As a result, "whole-university approaches" have gained traction, recognising that well-being is shaped by all aspects of the student experience, including learning, teaching, and curriculum design (Student Minds, 2019). IL, however, remains largely neglected within this agenda. While IL is widely regarded as a core graduate attribute, its relationship with student well-being is rarely addressed. Indeed, well-being initiatives and IL development are typically treated as separate domains.

This article argues that these two areas are fundamentally interconnected. Drawing on recent research, it demonstrates that the conceptual ambiguity surrounding IL generates uncertainty, frustration, and overwhelm, directly impacting students' mental well-being. It further proposes that structured, phased scaffolding offers a practical and effective means of addressing these challenges.

Conceptual Ambiguity and Emotional Strain

IL is commonly associated with autonomy, curiosity, and ownership of learning. With independent learners better able to adapt to change, fulfil their potential and progress in their careers. Reflecting this, both staff and students recognise its importance in transforming learners from dependent to autonomous individuals capable of self-directed learning. This transformation, however, is not automatic, and many students arrive at university unprepared for the expectations of independent learning, having previously experienced more structured and directive educational environments. The transition can therefore be experienced as abrupt and disorienting.

Although IL is central to higher education, its meaning remains poorly defined and poorly understood. There is no single, shared definition across the sector, and both staff and students interpret it differently (Thomas et al., 2015). Students often reduce IL to working alone or completing tasks without support,

reflecting a narrow and sometimes misleading understanding (Forbes-McKay et al., 2025). This ambiguity, however, is not simply a conceptual issue; it also has emotional consequences.

Our research highlights that this uncertainty contributes to anxiety, frustration, overwhelm and lack of confidence. Students frequently describe feeling "lost" or directionless, particularly in the early stages of their university experience. Without sufficient guidance or understanding, independence may be interpreted as abandonment. Indeed, students report feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsure of how to proceed. Research suggests that inadequate scaffolding during this transition can negatively impact both well-being and academic engagement (Wilbraham et al., 2024). Rather than fostering resilience, poorly supported independence can erode confidence and contribute to disengagement.

The Overprescription–Dependence Cycle

In response to students' difficulties, academic staff often increase the level of guidance provided. While well-intentioned, this approach can produce unintended consequences. Students describe feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information and uncertain about how to prioritise their efforts. As a result, they become increasingly reliant on staff direction, seeking reassurance and clarification at every stage. Staff, in turn, respond to this dependency by providing further guidance, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Our research conceptualises this as a cycle of overprescription and dependence. Efforts to reduce student anxiety inadvertently limit opportunities for developing independence, while simultaneously contributing to cognitive overload.

This cycle is emotionally taxing for both students and staff. Students experience overwhelm and reduced confidence, while staff report frustration and a sense of diminishing pedagogical effectiveness. Importantly, this dynamic does not reflect individual failings, but a structural tension within higher education between supporting students and fostering autonomy.

Structured Support: The Role of Scaffolding

If IL is developmental, it requires intentional support and structured scaffolding to guide students through this transition and gradually build their capacity for autonomy (Van de Pol et al., 2010). Effective scaffolding doesn't simply involve the provision of additional resources; it requires clarity, intentionality, and progression. In the early stages, this includes explicitly defining IL, outlining expectations, and modelling effective learning strategies. As students' progress, support should evolve to include opportunities for experiential learning, reflection, and application, which enable students to develop confidence in more authentic contexts. Crucially, scaffolding should involve a gradual transfer of responsibility from staff to students.

Balance, however, is essential. Overly structured environments inhibit independence, while insufficient support leads to anxiety and disengagement (Reiser, 2018). Structured support, when appropriately designed, reduces emotional strain and enables the development of autonomy.

Implications for Practice and Policy

These insights have important implications for higher education practice. If student well-being is to be addressed holistically, IL must be recognised as a key contributor to that agenda. Institutions should, therefore, consider clarifying the concept of IL at an institutional level, embedding explicit discussions of learning processes within teaching and induction, designing curricula that incorporate phased scaffolding across the student journey and recognising the emotional dimensions of learning within pedagogical practice.

This allows for a more nuanced understanding of student well-being, shifts focus from 'reacting to' student distress to designing learning environments that 'proactively acknowledge' and support the emotional realities of learning.

Conclusion

IL has long been positioned as a defining feature of higher education. Yet, when poorly understood and inadequately supported, it can become a source of uncertainty, overwhelm, and emotional strain for both staff and students. The conceptual ambiguity at its core, combined with structural pressures within higher education, contributes to a cycle of overprescription and dependence that undermines both autonomy and confidence. Structured, phased scaffolding offers a practical solution. By clarifying expectations and supporting students through the transition to independence, institutions can reduce emotional strain and foster more sustainable learning.

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7. The Faculty Frontier: The Role of Academic Staff in Supporting Student Well-being and Setting Healthy Boundaries in Kenyan Universities

by **Joseph Mwita Kisito,** Head of Department and Lecturer, Social Sciences Department, The East African University (TEAU), Kitengela, Kenya

Abstract

The well-being of students in higher education institutions is increasingly becoming a critical concern. This is particularly the case in universities as they confront rising cases of academic stress, mental health challenges, and evolving student-faculty relationships. In Kenyan universities, students experiencing academic-related, personal, and emotional difficulties consider academic staff as the first point of contact. However, while professors and lecturers find themselves in this unique role of supporting students' well-being, this also raises a fundamental question about professional boundaries. This relationship becomes even more complex when viewed against the backdrop of faculty's heavy teaching workloads, and inadequate preparedness to handle students' welfare concerns. This article explores the faculty frontier, focusing on the intersection between academic responsibilities and student welfare support in the context of Kenyan universities. Specifically, the article focuses on how academic staff contribute to the student welfare while maintaining healthy professional boundaries. The article examines existing institutional frameworks, practices, expectations for faculty members, and the likely challenges faced while balancing teaching, mentorship, and pastoral support responsibilities. It draws on emerging literature on student well-being and faculty engagement, with the discussion highlighting the importance of equipping academic staff with the right skills and training to handle student affairs. Additionally, the article explores institutional support systems and suggests guidelines for responding to the students' needs. Attention is also given to the risk of role strain, emotional labour, and boundary ambiguity which are bound to arise when academic staff assume informal counseling or support roles without adequate institutional structures. The article concludes that universities must adopt structured approaches that appreciate the contributions of faculty to students' well-being while simultaneously protecting their professional space and personal comfort. The focus on the Kenyan context allows the paper to contribute to the broader debate of the need for a balance between creating supportive learning environments for the students' success and sustainable academic work practices for faculty members. The findings are expected to provide practical insights to higher education management, faculty members, and policymakers, allowing a holistic approach to strengthening student support systems while maintaining clear and healthy academic boundaries.

Introduction

Globally, the well-being of university students is increasingly becoming a big concern for institutions, parents, and the student population alike. According to recent statistics, almost 30-40% of the students in Ugandan universities experience symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and mental distress (Mugotitsa et al, 2025). Kenyan collegians are not an exception in this dilemma, with the scenario becoming even more complex owing to the pressing academic demands and societal transitions amidst increasing financial demands. This context places academic staff in a unique position, where beyond their

conventional instructional and research roles, they also serve as the first point of contact for distressed students.

Yet, the faculty members' forefront role in students' support systems might jeopardize their primary responsibilities of academic rigour and research development. This state introduces a delicate balancing act, thereby calling for the need to set boundaries. Without distinct professional limits, the academic staff risk role ambiguity, likely to lead to emotional burnout, and diminished instructional quality (Bishop and High, 2023). Conversely, overly inflexible boundaries can lead to student alienation and discourage help-seeking practices. In this article, Kenyan universities' academic staff are perceived as playing a central role in fostering student well-being. However, this role must be placed within clearly delineated and healthy rules of professional engagement to guarantee effective and sustainable student support.

Academic Staff and Student Well-being Frontline Support

Within the context of university operational environment, academic staff are the most consistently within-reach individuals in the students' experience. Contrary to professional counseling staff, whose number may not be sufficient vis-à-vis that of the students, lecturers have regular interactions with students through classes, assessments, and consultations. According to a study by Muturiki et al (2026) on academic-related stress among students in universities in the sub-Saharan African region, more than 40% of students in psychological stress prefer talking to lecturers rather than seeking counseling services. This reinforces the implicit pastoral role played by academic staff despite lack of formal training in mental health support and student counseling services.

In their informal counseling or advice-giving roles, lecturers aspire to create supportive learning environments, and in the process significantly contribute to the well-being of students. Yet, the big question here might be whether the faculty members meet the students' expectations in this context, and the kind of impact the former's advice has on the latter's well-being and learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, research has shown that simple practices and gestures such as flexible continuous assessment deadlines during crises, equity-focused and student-centred teaching approaches, and empathetic communication can play a significant role in reducing student stress (Zannella and Sutherland, 2025). Another study by Archbell and Coplan (2022) revealed that academic anxiety was considerably lower among students who perceived their lecturers as approachable and considerate. In this sense, student well-being support clearly does not necessarily rely on specialized interventions; rather, this can be embedded within normal teaching practices.

Furthermore, academic staff play a critical role in early detection of distress among students, facilitating possible timely intervention. A study by Umennuihe et al. (2025) revealed that attendance, performance, or behavioural changes can be indicative of students' underlying concerns, such as mental health challenges, financial difficulties, or familial disharmony. As such, faculty staff's attentiveness to these pointers can facilitate students' access to proper institutional support services. This proactive lecturer-student interaction aligns with international best practices, which underscore the importance of early intervention in averting severe mental outcomes among university populations.

Setting Healthy Boundaries: Why Is This Important?

Yes, the supportive role of academic staff is indispensable in the university learning environment. However, this must be carefully managed through well-defined professional boundaries to avoid counterproductive outcomes, such as burnout among the academic staff themselves. Absence of such boundaries may lead to role overload among the academic staff, where lecturing responsibilities are

compounded by emotional labour. A recent cross-sectional study by Muriuki et al (2025) in Kenyan universities established that academic staff often experience burnout, partly as a result of increased student support demands. This is a pointer to the risks associated with unstructured academic staff engagement in student welfare matters.

Healthy boundaries for academic staff help clearly define roles and responsibilities, thus avoiding unnecessary clashes, work burden or emotional exhaustion. Understandably, most lecturers are not trained therapists, which makes it untenable for them to effectively assume student support roles. This delineation guarantees specialized care for students while allowing faculty to uphold their core instructional duties. Be it as it may, this does not preclude faculty from actively listening and empathetically providing initial guidance that sets the stage for professional service referrals, including university counseling offices.

Recent studies have indicated that setting boundaries protect the integrity of student-lecturer academic relationship (Lehane et al, 2024). Conversely, over-engagement in students' personal matters by academic staff can result in blurred professional interactions, potentially leading to moral dilemmas, favouritism, and compromised assessment criteria. Therefore, to help academic staff to navigate these complexities, clear regulatory frameworks and institutional guidelines are necessary. Well-structured university student support rules as well as staff training and referral protocols ensure that lecturers can engage with their students compassionately without overstepping their professional mandates.

Institutional Capacity Building and Support

The academic staff's capacity and effectiveness in student well-being support is largely dependent on institutional support. Regarding mental health among the student populations, for example, several Kenyan universities are increasingly adopting an integrated approach, aligning mental health awareness programs with their strategic priorities (Otundo, 2024). This includes expansion of counseling services in response to mounting student needs. Nonetheless, the counselor-to-student ratio still remains extremely low in some universities, sometimes surpassing the 1:10,000 mark. The situation forces reliance on supplementary support services from academic staff, but this is unsustainable.

There is therefore an urgent need for staff training and capacity building to bridge student support knowledge gap and enhance academic and psychological support systems. Research shows that staff with mental health awareness and training skills are far better placed to effectively execute at-risk student referrals (Muriuki et al, 2025). Equally critical is inculcation of supportive institutional culture across universities, fostering environments that prioritize student well-being in addition to academic excellence. Manageable workloads for lecturers, flexible policies, and open dialogue about student well-being should form part of the main discussions in universities.

However, equipping all academic staff with basic mental health literacy, effective communication skills, and referral resource familiarity might be futile to most universities. Besides inadequate financial resources, some institutions are already faced with severe faculty burnout and emotional labour due to heavy academic workloads and demanding research undertakings. Asking them to take up the additional role of first responders for severe student mental health crises is therefore likely to lead to secondary trauma, exacerbating faculty turnover.

Conclusion

Kenyan universities' academic staff play a fundamental role in student well-being support, acting as mentors, early detectors of distress, and facilitators of supportive learning environments. Due to their unique position, they not only influence students' academic outcomes, but also emotional and

psychological resilience. Yet, this role must carefully resonate with the need to balance professional boundaries with individual development to allow effective, ethical, and sustainable support for the well-being of both staff and students. Institutions must embed faculty-student support within institutional framework. This can be done through enhanced training investment, strengthened counseling services, and promoting of a caring culture. Above all, empowering academic staff is inevitable if a holistic student support culture is to be inculcated in Kenyan universities for a healthier, and more resilient higher education system.

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8. The Compassion Frontier: Reclaiming Faculty Boundaries in the Era of the "Accidental First Responder”

by **Caterina Valenino,** Contract Lecturer, Toronto Metropolitan University, Ted Rogers School of Management, ON Canada, Instructor, Athabasca University, Faculty of Health Disciplines, Athabasca, AB Canada

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The email arrives at 11:42 PM, the night before the assignment due date.

The subject line is the first indicator – Assignment Extension - URGENT.

The student’s email message reads like a frantic, modern-day "Dear Abby" letter, but it isn’t landing in a syndicated advice column. It’s in your university email.

Professor,

I’m so sorry to email you this late, but I am completely overwhelmed and am having a panic attack. I can’t finish the assignment due tomorrow. My group project in another class is falling apart, I'm working two jobs just to cover tuition, and there’s a family emergency back home.

I don't know what to do.

Can I please get a one-week extension with no penalty? I just need some breathing room.

Instructors are not crisis counselors. And if the instructor’s area of expertise is crisis management it’s a conflict of interest to become involved in a student’s personal affairs. Yet, thousands of higher education faculty members who receive these email messages are unconsciously volunteered to become an accidental first responder in a student’s mental health moment. A moment they were never trained to manage (Deep et al., 2025).

Many higher education educators have reached a breaking point driven by an unsustainable scope creep – that’s a gradual, uncompensated expansion of teaching administrative duties. A creep that blurs the line between a contractually agreed-upon workload and ever-increasing expectations—managing student accommodations, email inquiries, extra-curricular student mentorship—often leading to instructor burnout (Kouritzin, 2019). The weight that’s pulling instructors under isn’t the traditional pressure of "publish or perish." It’s the relentless, unbudgeted accumulation of emotional labor - putting another’s feelings and desires before your own (Berdahl and Schults, 2024).

DiPlacito-DeRango (2022) concluded that several Canadian post-secondary institutions advise instructors to connect students to professional on and off campus mental health resources believing this action helps

to reduce the potential of instructors stepping outside their scope of teaching responsibilities. DiPlacito-DeRango cautions that increasingly placing instructors as a crucial component of a university's student mental health support network in the absence of providing adequate professional development, clear boundaries, and structural supports create undue instructor strain and, in some instances, leaves students unsupported. This operational reality underpins what DiPlacito-DeRango calls the "Triage Trap." That's where professors are increasingly caught between their traditional academic duties and the urgent demands of student crisis intervention pleas.

The Triage Trap and Compassion Fatigue

For decades, the faculty portfolio rested on the predictable triad of teaching, research, and service. Today, that triad has morphed into the "Triage Trap"— the implicit expectation that professors act as the frontline triage unit for student psychological distress. The JED Foundation (McPhee, 2025; Branch, 2026) found that over 70% of faculty members have had conversations with students about mental health, yet fewer than 30% feel adequately trained to handle these conversations. Today's instructors find themselves navigating complex student non-academic problems from depression to acute trauma, all while trying to maintain academic standards.

This scope creep (Kouritzin, 2019) results in instructor compassion fatigue (Canadian Medical Association, 2020). Unlike standard professional burnout which stems from administrative overwork, compassion fatigue is the profound emotional exhaustion arising from absorbing the trauma and suffering of others (Berdahl and Schults, 2024; Kouritzin, 2019). In higher education, compassion fatigue manifests when empathetic educators repeatedly step into the role of unlicensed counselors without emotional boundaries or professional support. Moreover, instructor compassion fatigue has dominoed into a critical talent drain and retention issues where tenured and tenure-track faculty quietly exit the academy for sectors where professional boundaries are structurally enforced.

The 2026 Boundary Movement

In response to this systemic erosion, a proactive countermovement has emerged. Forward-thinking universities are recognizing that reactive sympathy is better replaced by a policy framework that delineates instructor workload boundaries. In 2026 several university's developed institutional polices such as the red folder and digital sunset policies that decouple academic mentorship from student emergency crisis management and outline pathways that redirect mental health care to appropriate practitioners (Campus Mental Health, 2026).

Standardized "Red Folder" triage systems (Western Connecticut University, Red Folder) have been developed across several university systems. These digital and physical frameworks give faculty a definitive, immediate action protocol when a student discloses a crisis. Rather than attempting to counsel the student, the "Red Folder" workflow outlines an immediate, seamless, instructor hands-off protocol to other campus and non-campus intervention services. Red folder pathways shift the faculty role from an absorber of crisis to a conduit for professional care removing the ambiguity that often traps professors in ongoing emotional labor.

The second innovation, "Digital Sunset" policies (The Secretariat, Coalition for Digital Education Wellness, 2026) addresses the power of learning management systems and communication apps to turn the student-instructor relationship into a 24/7 chatroom. Digital sunset policy delineates blocks of time for instructors to decouple from their electronic devices. By establishing "right to disconnect," universities are enshrining in policy the faculty's need to recover from the daily demands of teaching.

Beyond Self-Care: Structural Resilience

For years, the institutional response to faculty burnout was to offer lunchtime yoga, subscription tokens to mindfulness apps, and webinars on managing stress. These initiatives operate on the premise that systemic institutional overwork can be solved by personal wellness modifications.

> Systemic Institutional Overwork] ≠ Solved By: [Individual Wellness Modifications (Yoga/Apps)]

True institutional resilience requires structural change. Faculty time must be budgeted with the same fiscal discipline that applies to financial endowments. If a university expects a professor to dedicate significant hours to intensive student mentorship and wellness tracking, that labor must be formalized. It must be accounted for via:

- Course releases
- Reduced administrative service requirements
- Explicit recognition within tenure and promotion rubrics

Universities must increase investments in expanding professional and centralized student affairs staff. Adding access to more counselors, crisis response teams, and academic case managers is not just a student wellness strategy; it is a direct investment in preserving the institution's core research and teaching capacity.

Conclusion: Redrawing the Frontier

The primary mission of higher education remains the creation and dissemination of knowledge through teaching and research. When professors are pulled to act as an ad-hoc student social safety net, that primary mission is compromised.

Decoupling academic support from emotional crisis management is not an act of cold indifference; it is an act of institutional preservation. If universities do not aggressively redraw these boundaries, the very frontier of academic talent will vanish. True institutional resilience in 2026 means recognizing a fundamental truth: to effectively care for the students, the university must first protect the professors.

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9. Balancing Technology Use and Mental Health in Higher Education

by **Prof. Oyenuga Michael**, Associate Professor in Marketing, Assistant Dean (International Relations), Woxsen University, Hyderabad, India

Introduction

Higher education today sits at a critical crossroads where digital tools can amplify learning while also challenging student and staff mental health. The holistic classroom mindset, seen through the lens of higher education, also recognises that technology is a lever for inclusion, engagement and well-being rather than another stressor to be tamed on its own. For practitioners, this supports a growing evidence base against technostress, the stress induced by the use of ICT that can undermine motivation, mood and cognitive effort, exacerbated under pandemic-accelerated demand. Universities can retain academic rigour and protect mental health by intentionally aligning tech integration with well-being supports.

Understanding technostress in higher education

Technostress can take different forms, including overload, invasion of personal time and perceived insecurity about the ability to properly use technology, all leading to negative impacts on well-being and productivity (Musa et al., 2024). These negative influences could be alleviated by perceived organisational support, highlighting the importance of university policy that could convey materialisation of supportive infrastructure to maintain mental health as we continue digitising (Harunavamwe and Ward, 2022). Technology use in higher education that is not well supported leads to more fatigue, loneliness, and

disengagement among students and staff, which can be related to lower academic persistence and satisfaction (Apata and Oyedele, 2025).

Technostress will not affect everyone equally, and the effects it has on individuals can be moderated by digital literacy, work-life boundaries, and social support within the institutional ecosystem. Work-life balance and motivation are moderators of ICT-related stress, affecting university mental health outcomes (Comotti et al., 2025). On the other hand, adaptive strategies (e.g., digital literacy training, clear limits on time commitment and encouragement to disconnect) can contribute to better mental health in all groups and prevent disengagement from learning activities (Oyenuga et al., 2024). Accordingly, interventions targeting individuals, teams and institutional systems could reduce technostress while harnessing technology for positive educational outcomes (Lindsley, 2025).

Practical strategies for practitioners

A more practical starting point is to burn well-being-centric design principles in digital learning environments. These can be reduced-complexity interactions, explicitly communicated expectations for online behaviour, and periodic and brief check-ins that encourage students to monitor the ways in which technology shapes their attention and emotional states (Naga and Ebardo, 2025). Moreover, digital downtime routines and specific guidance about screen time, as well as peer support, can serve to buffer technostress while enhancing belonging in online or hybrid environments (Holley and Biggins, 2023).

These ideas can be operationalised at scale in institutions which encourage mandatory digital literacy modules for all students and staff, professional development for faculty on inclusive online pedagogy, and policies guaranteeing the right to opt out of after-hours communication (Liverpool et al., 2023).

Additionally, programmes should be created that include direct technology use (Oyenuga et al., 2026; Schettino et al., 2022) and specific dimensions of well-being (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment-PERMA).

This second practical axis is related to coupling technostress management to institutional policies that promote the flourishing of mental health in higher education. Techno-stress can be buffered with organisational support, clear expectations of workload and sociability among peers and students (Vallone et al., 2023). Having policies promoting real flexibility during peak periods of assessment workload, along with options to disconnect digitally from work hours, and support for seeking counselling or well-being spaces can help reduce spillover stress into academic and research (Harunavamwe and Ward, 2022).

It may be necessary for practitioners to take targeted action regarding the ability of more vulnerable groups, early-career academics or students with limited prior ICT experience. This approach includes steps to create identity-safe online spaces and equitable access to devices and connectivity so that all learners can be valued and capable members of technologically mediated learning environments.

Institutions should monitor well-being across a range of practical outcomes (for example, engagement, screen-time balance, reported stress and access to well-being supports) along with technology indicators. Finally, having continuous evaluation with short feedback loops will help maintain improvements and ensure adaptability against changing technology landscapes (Bencsik and Juhász, 2023).

Conclusion

Balancing technology use and mental health in higher education requires a deliberate, multi-level approach that treats digital tools as allies rather than antagonists. With practical classroom design, supportive policies and leadership, as well as accessible well-being resources, universities can maintain rigorous academic standards while protecting the mental health of students and staff.

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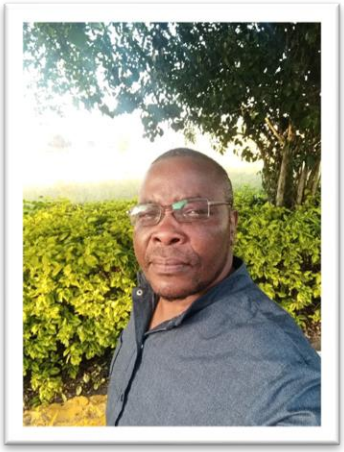
10.The Weight of Excellence: Examining the Relationship Between Academic Pressure and Student Mental Health in Kenyan Secondary Schools



by **Joseph Mwita Kisito,** Head of Department and Lecturer, Social Sciences Department, The East African University (TEAU), Kitengela, Kenya

Abstract

The Kenyan educational system places a strong emphasis on academic achievements for the learners in all levels. especially in secondary schools where performance in national examinations is seen as a guarantee for a student's future. While students are motivated to excel academically, this drive often creates significant pressure that can negatively impact their mental health and well-being. Kenyan secondary school students are reporting rising levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, highlighting the urgent need to investigate the link between academic expectations and student mental health. This paper examines the relationship between academic pressure and mental health outcomes among secondary school students in Kenya. Specifically, the article explores key sources of academic pressure, including parental expectations, high-stakes examinations, competitive learning environments, and institutional performance targets. Additionally, the analysis addresses how factors like excessive workloads, limited recreational time, and fear of failure contribute to heightened psychological stress among students. Drawing on emerging research within the Kenyan educational setting, this discourse highlights how persistent academic pressure compromises students' emotional resilience, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Furthermore, the paper examines how educators, school administrators, and policymakers can mitigate these negative effects on student mental health. The article advocates for a more balanced educational approach that prioritizes both academic standards and students' well-being. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of strengthened guidance and counseling services, integrating mental health awareness into the curriculum, and fostering supportive learning environments. The findings contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the creation of healthier and more supportive secondary school environments in Kenya by explicitly focusing on the relationship between academic demands and student mental health.

Introduction

Academic pursuit in Kenya, much like in other countries across the sub-Saharan region and around the globe, is becoming increasingly competitive. As a critical stage for determining career pathways in tertiary education, the secondary school system often attracts immense attention from all key stakeholders. However, students are consequently expected to shoulder much of this burden, experiencing intense pressure from parents, educators, and the general public. Recent studies have shown that during students' final year in secondary schools where they are supposed to sit the Kenya Certificate of

Secondary Education (KCSE), the pressure increases even more (Ouma, 2023). This is majorly driven by the overriding desire for the secondary school finalists to secure good entry points to postsecondary education and future employment opportunities. Yet, while this immense pressure can sometimes improve academic outcomes, there are rising concerns about the psychological toll it takes on learners.

The Interplay Between Academic Pressure and Student Mental Health

Growing empirical evidence indicates a strong link between intense academic pressure and student mental health struggles among Kenyan secondary school learners (Ayiro et al, 2023; Cherono et al, 2026). Commonly reported symptoms frequently include anxiety, depression, and burnout, alongside other stress-related behaviours. This implies that when taken to extremes, the drive for academic excellence can ironically undermine the very well-being necessary for sustainable success. Understanding this interlinkage is therefore crucial for designing balanced instructive approaches that promote both academic achievement and student mental wellness.

The high-stakes KCSE examination system remains a major source of academic pressure among Kenyan secondary school learners today. This terminal examination is widely perceived as the foundation for a student's future, dictating access to scholarships, university placement, and ultimately a more promising career. Against this backdrop, most parents and school administrators frequently prioritize exam performance over all-inclusive development of the learners (Kamundi, 2026). Driven by these expectations, students are subjected to highly schedules, characterized by dawn-to-dusk study sessions, constant learner evaluations, and mock examination tests. This inexorable academic environment often leads to chronic stress, anxiety and mental fatigue, leaving students with an incessant feeling that their self-worth is tied primarily to their grades. Research has consistently linked excessive workloads and overscheduling to deteriorated mental well-being, especially when accompanied by sleep deprivation and absence of free time (Liang et al., 2025; Nasir et al., 2025).

The competitive culture nurtured within schools themselves is another contributing factor to student mental well-being. The Kenyan government's official abolition of ranking of schools and candidates in national examinations in 2014, including the KCSE, has not dismantled the deep-seated tradition of high-pressure environments in secondary schools to date. The policy ban was enforced to prevent unhealthy competition, minimize exam irregularities, and generally curb unethical practices within a highly aggressive and competitive academic environment in secondary schools. Yet, more than a decade later, it is evident that while the nature of competition might have shifted, the psychological pressure exerted on students remains more or less the same.

Schools' internal ranking systems persist, where 'streaming' or tracking of students is, for example, based on performance. The public display of exam results, typically done by school administrators without consulting students or their parents/guardians, typifies another systemic manner of exerting psychological pressure on students. Even today, this practice remains a primary driver for unhealthy competition as students strive to outperform their peers. While healthy competition can serve as a motivating factor for students, excessive emphasis on ranking can cause feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem among those whose performance falls below par. In such cases, heightened anxiety can easily set in, particularly when moderate exam performers perceive themselves as falling behind their peers.

Beyond examination pressure, parental and societal expectations play a significant role in psychological overburdening of learners, spanning all levels of education system across different learning institutions. Empirical evidence demonstrates that some parents emphasize the aspect of financial and emotional 'investment' in their schooling children, consequently demanding a tangible 'return on investment' in the form of top performance (Wati and Sahid, 2022). Frequently, these external expectations are internalized by students, creating fear of failure or disappointment, and causing them to carry a heavy emotional

burden that can eventually manifest as irritability, burnout, or emotional numbness. Societal narratives that equate academic success with intrinsic intelligence and future prosperity often intensify this pressure. Consequently, these dynamics can create a fear-driven learning environment where students are motivated more by the need to conform to societal demands rather than by genuine curiosity.

Impact of Academic Pressure

Long-term academic pressure has a multifaceted effect on student mental health. Anxiety disorders are a common manifestation among students under constant pressure to perform academically. This is typically characterized by endless apprehension, agitation, and strained concentration. Additionally, some students may develop depression symptoms, such as persistent sadness, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

A study by Faiman and Strouse (2025) revealed that burnout is common among students under intense pressure, especially among high-achievers who struggle to sustain their already good positions. Besides affecting academic outcomes, such mental health struggles interfere with social relationships and overall quality of life. A worst-case scenario for prolonged stress is harmful coping mechanisms, where the victims may resort to escapist behaviours, such as alcohol and substance abuse, social alienation, and absenteeism from school to cope with educational demands. Cases of self-harm and suicidal ideation have also been linked to academic stress, underscoring the myriads of potential bad consequences of an education system that prioritizes performance at the expense of the learners' mental well-being.

Mitigation Measures

Notwithstanding the challenges, mitigating the negative effects of academic pressure is still possible. Schools can adopt a more balanced approach to learning, emphasizing emotional well-being alongside academic success. Integration of mental health education into the curriculum, accessible and affordable counseling services, and promoting supportive teacher-learner relationships are some of the practical steps that can be adopted by all the key stakeholders. A more inclusive and supportive learning environment can also be encouraged through collaborative efforts, rather than promoting excessive competition among students and between schools.

To the parents and policymakers, they have an important role to play in addressing existing gaps. Setting realistic expectations and emphasizing personal effort and growth rather than just academic outcomes may be the way to go. At policy level, reforms intended to neutralize the high-stakes nature of examinations can be intensified to help alleviate pressure. Furthermore, there is need to increase investment and focus in school-based mental health services to ensure timely counseling support access by students.

Conclusion

Based on empirical and documentary evidence, there is a clear linkage between excessive academic pressure and psychological distress among learners. While emphasis on academic excellence in Kenyan secondary education cannot be wished away, this should not happen at the expense of students' mental health. Addressing the situation requires collective efforts from schools, parents, and policymakers to create a more balanced and supportive learning environment. Students' learning success must be redefined to include mental well-being, resilience, and personal development. This would allow Kenyan education system to nurture not only high-performing students, but also well-rounded and healthy individuals capable of flourishing both academically and emotionally.

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11. The Holistic Classroom: Integrating Well-being and Mindfulness into the Academic Curriculum

by **Prof. Oyenuga Michael**, Associate Professor in Marketing, Assistant Dean (International Relations), Woxsen University, Hyderabad, India

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Introduction

The holistic classroom reimagines schooling as a culture that interlaces well-being and mindfulness within everyday learning. Instead of treating well-being as an addition, leaders are being invited to weave attention, emotion regulation and compassionate relationships into the very fabric of the curriculum. Integrating these practices into everyday lessons, routines, and school culture can help educators

promote students' intrinsic motivation, resilience and sense of belonging. The focus here is on what teachers and school leaders can do to account for real impact in their classrooms.

Framing a holistic classroom

In a holistic classroom, well-being is seen as an integral pillar of learning, not merely as another class. Well-being content can be explicit and delivered in stand-alone modules or embedded in daily classroom instruction, with many practitioners acknowledging that positive education is achieved through both explicit and implicit pathways (Arguís-Rey, 2021). An important takeaway is the potential scalability of mindfulness practices via delivery by teachers, minimising the need for outside facilitators but maintaining adherence to essential outcomes such as attention, self-regulation, and caring (Fu et al., 2023). In practice, this means designing routines that foreground moment-to-moment awareness, compassionate responses to self and others, and regular opportunities for reflection within existing subjects like language arts, science, and social studies (Coulombe et al., 2020).

With the knowledge that holistic classrooms are likely to be most effective when they include universal practices for all students, and action-focused supports for those who need them, schools can take a multi-layered approach to operationalisation. Leadership and policy to classroom interactions and peer networks can facilitate this, while daily classroom-level mindfulness exercises that students can engage in are maintained. This holistic position also underpins the well-being of teachers, which subsequently contributes to student–teacher relationships and learning outcomes (Waalkes et al., 2023).

Practical mindfulness integration in daily practice

An easy starting point is to set some brief, regular mindfulness moments at the beginning of each lesson, in between different subjects and after lunch. Breathing cycles, body scans, or sensory check-ins are examples of simple practices (Fu et al., 2023) that can aid in arousal regulation and focus gain while asserting a nonjudgmental attitude toward experience. Schools, therefore, need to ensure that their approach to embedding these routines is supplemented by high-quality, brief and scalable professional development equipping all teachers with practical approaches for integrating mindfulness into lesson design, assessment and feedback.

Moreover, involving students in developing mindfulness-related norms can also encourage ownership as well as further mitigate stigma and may align with inclusive practices that value the diverse and multiple identities and backgrounds of classroom members (Hernandez and Darling-Hammond, 2022). Schools should integrate mindfulness moments within the framework of positive education models, where it exists, wherever possible, to maintain connections across the curriculum.

While quick practices are a piece, more holistic approaches bring mindfulness into broader positive-education strategies, including social-emotional learning (SEL), strengths-based pedagogy, and climate of care. A whole school approach integrating a universal well-being curriculum and embedded practices, focusing on attention, emotional management, relationships and goal-setting as pathways to well-being (Gürsel-Bilgin and Bengü, 2021). From this perspective, mindfulness provides a vehicle for stronger self-regulation, empathy and resilience, even as they support academic achievement and social cohesion. Additionally, coordinating mindfulness with inclusive education and identity-safe classrooms can ameliorate engagement amongst students from marginalised groups, extending both a sense of belonging and the possibility to persist academically (Apata and Oyenuga, 2025).

Another critical lever to support successful holistic classrooms is teacher well-being. When teachers practice mindfulness, it will help them to develop emotional regulation, compassion toward students and resilience to stress, which promotes positive student-teacher interactions and classroom climates (Norton

and Griffith, 2020; Oyenuga and Apata, 2026). Moreover, school leadership is critical as they make time for training, shield mindfulness work from competing demands, and model mindful, attentive leadership that prioritises social-emotional learning in tandem with academics (Coulombe et al., 2020; Oyenuga, 2026). That reciprocal relationship facilitates more effective practice in the classroom, which protects student well-being and vice versa.

However, implementation does not take place just by excitement; it requires a proper plan. Practice-centred guidance includes beginning with a modest number of routines but expanding these piloted methods over time, together with cyclic and repetitive reflection as per learning rounds, coaching conversations and micro-evaluations to iteratively improve ongoing work and share what works across classrooms (Stevenson and Lemons, 2021). Focusing on practical results like greater attention during work tasks, better transitions, and more cooperative classroom norms keeps staff and students engaged.

Conclusion

The holistic classroom weaves well-being and mindfulness into the academic life tapestry of routines and pedagogy with school culture. The practical strategies described here, namely opportunities for guided mindfulness embedded in lessons, teacher-led delivery, and implementation of an entire-school approach to well-being pathways, provide a logical and feasible road map for practitioners wishing to optimise student learning. With an emphasis on focusing attention, regulating behaviour and emotion, fostering empathy, and building relationships in daily instruction, educators can build a learning community that is inclusive, resilient, and cognitively engaged.

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HETL *Frontiers* Team

Martina Jordaan

Sameerah T. Saeed

Patrick Blessinger

Taisir Subhi Yamin

Rakel Kavena Shalyefu

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HETL association, 138 Queens Blvd., Unit 105 Briarwood, NY 11435
E-mail: support@hetl.org
Website:https//www.hetl.org