

FRAMEWORK GUIDELINES FOR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING OF STUDENTS IN HEIs

Creation of Inclusive, integrative and non discriminatory environment:

For emotional and mental well being of the students, importance of conscious and sustained efforts to create an inclusive environment in HEIs for all the students, especially those from marginalized and economically and social disadvantaged sections cannot be overemphasized. Institutions are required to device and put in place in-built safeguards and protective mechanisms to encourage inclusive behavior in student-student, student-teacher and student-administration interactions. Creating awareness and sensitization through introduction of specifically designed courses, seminars, interactive talk shows etc focusing on neutral modes of communication (verbal, non verbal, gestural) and inter-personal interactions for administrators, faculty members and students should be made a routine initiative, integral to the academic activities in the campus/institutes. Students' welfare provisions, which already exist in the HEIs in India, will have an added responsibility of collaborating with Student Service Centres (SSC), Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC) and Gender Equity Centre, SC/ST Cell, Grievance Cell of the institutions in order to offer holistic and comprehensive services to students.

Sensitization and capacity building programs for faculty members: NEP-2020 envisages mental health services as an integral part of education in higher learning. In order to sensitize and equip the faculty members of HEIs to create an educational environment nurturing emotional and mental wellbeing of its students, they may be encouraged to attend refresher course(s) on Counseling, Mental Health, Well-being, and Mentoring Skills and Competencies. Human Resource Development Centres (HRDC), Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya National Mission on Teachers (PMMMNTs), and Teaching Learning Centers of the country may be roped in to shoulder the responsibility of offering such courses. Faculty members must also be sensitized to take note of the different social, cultural, linguistic and economical backgrounds of their students for adopting a more humane and inclusive approach in their behavior and interactions with the student community. Faculty members are also required to be trained in all the four

dimensions of mentorship- physical, cognitive, emotion and social.

Orientation, Counseling and hand holding mechanisms: Institutions may put in place an orientation programme for each freshman/woman preferably involving guardians wherein the academic and non-academic expectations from the student, facilities available at the Institute should be explained in detail by the faculty members, student community and professional counselors. A psych evaluation of the new entrant including emotional stability, level/performance assessment and advisable remedial options, if required, may also be suggested in a positive and friendly manner. Psychometric assessment may be utilized as a tool to identify the areas and levels up to which the support systems are to be introduced for assisting students. Counseling may be incorporated as a periodic handholding measure for the entire duration of course/programme by engagement of peers, faculty members and professional career & emotional health counselors, including practicing psychologists. In special cases, anonymity may also be observed through virtual/screened counseling sessions in online mode. Students may be introduced to the techniques of stress management, time management and goal orientation through interactive sessions with experts, holding seminars, talk shows etc.

Early detection mechanisms for immediate intervention: It is important to identify the circumstances and factors leading to emotional distress and psychological issues in students along with early identification of such student to provide targeted and sustained assistance. Some of the parameters which can be used to identify such students could be performance in coursework, attendance in classrooms, participation in extra-curricular activities, skipping the mess regularly, reduced interaction with other students, etc. These parameters are suggestive and more such parameters may be identified by the institutes.

Developing Institutional SoPs and suicide prevention strategies: Govt. of India has been committed to promote health and mental well-being for all. The 'Mental Health Policy 2014' and the 'Mental Healthcare Act 2017' provides the much needed policy and legal framework to fortify efforts to promote mental and emotional well being of people which also address suicide as significant public health concern. Several policy documents, guidelines and regulations have been published by the Govt through Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Education which focus on comprehensive strategies and mechanisms to tackle suicide attempts and prevent suicides at large. The National Suicide Prevention Strategy published by MoHFW is a first-of-its-kind comprehensive document which addresses risk factors underlying suicide and delineates protective systems and suitable interventions to prevent suicides. UGC has also circulated this document as framework guideline for suicide prevention in HEIs along with various other

guidelines issued from time to time for promotion of psychological and emotional well being of students. HEIs may draw from these available guidelines and polices to design customized SoPs and suicide prevention strategies for their institutions.

Buddy and mentor system in a link chain model: Institutions may device a link chain model wherein each student is assigned a buddy, who may be one year senior to him/her and they should be linked to a mentor who will faculty member other than those engaged directly in teaching a particular semester/year and unrelated to their own stream/faculty/department/specialization. In this manner, it may be ensured that each student has access to lateral and vertical support system in the institute, keeping in view, enrichment of life skills for psychological wellbeing.

Tie-ups/MoUs with premier psychiatric Institutions: Institutional framework may be established in form of tie-ups/MoUs with organizations such as NIMHANS, HBAS, RINPAS, AIIMS and others where fully functional departments of psychiatry are available in order to engage mental health professionals for specialized psychiatric sessions and dedicated pharmacological or other medical interventions as per the requirement. The collaborative effort can be extended by organizations working at a National Level such as Expressions India, for the preventive, promotive, early detection/intervention of adolescent and youth life skills, mental health and wellbeing.

Promoting close-knit student faculty interactive communities: Specialized learning in HEIs may create limited inter-personal interactions leading to feeling of isolation amongst some students. Needy Students from socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society may be given special attention lest they feel isolation at a deeper level due to their special circumstances. Hence, proactive steps must be taken in HEIs to encourage closer interactions between the members of faculty and students to create a sense of association and belongingness. Initiatives such as Mentor-Buddy System, System for Academic Mentoring and Assistance (SAMA), Remedial Assistance Interactive Working Groups, Personality Development Sessions etc. may be adopted by HEIs for systematic handholding of their student community. Human connect initiatives amongst students may also be introduced through organizing activities collective meditation, nature walks, voluntary social service campaigns etc.

Incorporating team activities within the curricular exercises: HEIs should adopt measures to promote team based academic activities for students such as group projects, group discussions, team quiz competitions etc. Team activities create a cooperative and collaborative learning environment which encourages students to shed their inhibitions and apprehensions and helps in

developing confidence, empathy and self esteem.

Effective and Speedy Grievance redress mechanism: There are instances of academic decisions which make students suffer in silence leading to discontent, disconnect, stress, depression, and unfortunate incidences. The three-tiered grievances redressal system may be envisaged by the institutions, which will include 3 layers- Department, Institute, and a 3rd Party. The grievances raised at the level of the first two tiers may have a disposal timeline of 10 (ten) days. Any adverse decision by the first two tiers may be further referred for reassessment to the 3rd Party, should the student decide to escalate the matter to the third level.

To ensure transparency, the third tier may be designed as an external web-based Grievance Redressal Mechanism. For this, a panel of independent academicians will be prepared. Any three members from the panel will be randomly picked up, having no conflicts of interest, for handling grievances lodged on the portal. The members may then meet the aggrieved student and the concerned officials through video-conferencing and handle these issues with compassion rather than sticking to the rule book. The grievance should be disposed of within 3 (three) weeks, with a reasoned speaking order.

Physical Fitness Provisions and Programmes, emphasis on nutrition : HEIs must focus on incorporation of physical fitness programmes and activities for students as a mandatory element in their academic curriculum. It is a well known fact that physical activity has a direct correlation with the psychological health of human beings. Daily fitness activities and exercise lead to balance and composure in psycho-physiological and socio-emotional aspects of human behavior and interactions. Yoga has been known for its holistic approach to health and well being, it channelizes positivity and strengthens human mind along with the body. Each yogic activity is a key to improving flexibility, strength, balance and harmony. HEIs should promote the integration of yoga in the academic life on campus by introducing year long yoga event calendars, dedicated courses on yoga, organizing offline and online yoga practice sessions and mandatory yoga classes for students in the campus. Institutions have sufficient human resources and infrastructure for physical fitness programmes; and regular yoga and sports events should be arranged, wherein 100% participation from students may be ensured. Institution may also explore the avenues such as NSS & NCC, MoUs/tie-ups with sports councils, physical education and yoga departments/groups functioning within their States to engage their students in sports and fitness activities. Wherever feasible, the residential complexes, parks and student hostels within the campus of the institutions should also be equipped with indoor & outdoor gyms, green gyms, yoga centres, jogging and cycling pathways and sports stadiums.

It may be ensured that the campuses and institutes are equipped with nutrient centric eating options including the food being served in the hostels. The students may be made aware of the importance of balanced diet and healthy

eating practices for improvement of cognitive faculties and mental well being. Nutrition experts may be roped in to advise brain enriching foods to students. Availability of junk food, fast food items in the campus may be reduced by administrative intervention.

Third Party faceless evaluation mechanism: In order to get a realistic evaluation of the measures and initiatives undertaken by the HEIs to promote emotional and mental well being of its student communities, a mechanism of outsider 3rd party evaluation of the institutional environment may be adopted. A panel of Psychiatric professionals and experts may be prepared, which may undertake impromptu mental wellbeing audits within the campus and institutions.

Personal involvement and monitoring by the Heads of the Institutions: Heads of the institutions should make it a personal responsibility to interact with the identified students in need of counseling/psychological help to ensure their progress and overall well being. They should also take upon themselves to hold quarterly evaluation/assessment of the activities and programmes being run in their institutions for the mental wellbeing of their students. They should also review quarterly, the institutional preparedness regarding suicide prevention strategies and ensure that the SoPs made in this context remain relevant and functional.