

St. Joseph's College of Commerce, Bangalore

Stakeholder Feedback on the UGC Draft: Uniform Policy on Mental Health and Well-being for Higher Educational Institutions

The Uniform Policy on Mental Health and Well-being for Higher Educational Institutions is a timely and significant step toward institutionalizing mental health support within Indian higher education. This policy brings much-needed legitimacy, structure, and accountability to campus mental health services.

From a counsellor's perspective, its success will depend on how effectively it translates into ethical, student-centred, culturally responsive, and sustainable practices at the institutional level. The following recommendations are offered to strengthen operational clarity and ensure meaningful implementation across diverse higher educational contexts.

Key Recommendations

1. Strengthening Student-Centred and Non-Pathologizing Approaches

UGC may consider explicitly endorsing a student-centred framework that prioritizes autonomy, dignity, and developmental support.

- Emphasize non-pathologizing care that respects student agency.
- Recognize subclinical distress such as academic burnout, loneliness, adjustment concerns, and identity-related struggles.
- Ensure sensitivity to cultural, socio-economic, gender, caste, disability, and first-generation student experiences.

2. Addressing Counsellor Workload, Capacity, and Well-being

Clear operational norms are essential to prevent service dilution and counsellor burnout.

- Define recommended counsellor–student ratios or maximum active caseloads.
- Allocate protected time for documentation, outreach, Professional development training, and preventive programming.
- Provide clarity regarding institutional budget allocation for Counsellor training and professional development.
- Mandate regular clinical supervision with Senior Counsellors.
- Recognize and recommend personal therapy for counsellors as their well-being is integral to effective service quality.

- Develop a flexible framework to collect feedback about counsellors/ counselling and performance appraisal for them.

3. Clarifying Confidentiality, Ethics, and Data Governance

Students are more likely to seek support when confidentiality boundaries are transparent.

- Clearly define what remains confidential and what requires disclosure.
- Establish ethical data governance practices and clarify how documentation of session notes should be stored.
- Ensure that accessing mental health support does not automatically trigger punitive or disciplinary processes.

4. Strengthening and Safeguarding Peer Support Systems

Peer initiatives can significantly expand support networks when implemented responsibly.

- Clearly define the scope and limits of peer roles.
- Mandate structured training, supervision, and debriefing.
- Provide opt-out and rotation mechanisms to prevent emotional burden.
- Establish clear escalation protocols for risk situations.

5. Enhancing Crisis Management and Post-Crisis Care

Crisis experiences are often non-linear and require continuity of care.

- Develop comprehensive Suicide Prevention and Postvention Standard Operating Procedures (SOP).
- Include guidance for “grey-zone” distress that may not meet emergency thresholds.
- Provide structured support for affected peers, faculty, and staff.
- Emphasize reintegration and ongoing follow-up.

6. Nuanced and Consent-Based Family Involvement

Family engagement should be guided by student consent and contextual judgment.

- Prioritize informed student consent wherever possible.
- Allow counsellor discretion in situations where family involvement may be harmful.
- Recognize alternative support systems like friends, extended family, relatives, cousins.

7. Balancing Quantitative Reporting with Quality Indicators

Evaluation frameworks should reflect the relational nature of counselling.

- Incorporate qualitative indicators such as student perceptions of safety, accessibility, and support.
- Avoid evaluating services solely through numerical targets.

8. Expanding Identity-Sensitive and Inclusive Care

Institutions increasingly serve diverse student populations requiring affirming support systems.

- Encourage gender- and sexuality-affirmative practices.
- Promote disability-inclusive and neurodiversity-informed approaches.

9. Formalizing Academic Flexibility During Psychological Distress

Structured academic accommodations can prevent escalation of distress.

- Develop policies supporting flexibility in attendance, deadlines, and assessments during periods of psychological difficulty.

The draft policy represents a progressive move toward strengthening mental health ecosystems within higher education. With greater operational clarity, ethical safeguards, and attention to practitioner realities, the framework has the potential to foster compassionate, inclusive, and psychologically safer campuses across the country.

Illustrative Institutional Best Practices, St. Josephs College of Commerce, Bangalore

The following practices are being adopted within our higher educational institution and may be encouraged as part of institutional mental health frameworks:

- Structured orientation programmes for all students that normalize help-seeking.
- Using online/ integrated portals for seamless appointment/session booking.
- Preventive workshops on emotional well-being, relationships, gender sensitivity, and responsible digital behaviour.
- Peer support initiatives under professional supervision.
- Faculty sensitisation programmes to strengthen early identification and referral.
- Reflection spaces and group interventions that promote belongingness and community.
- Clear referral pathways for specialized and emergency care.
- Periodic intra-team review meetings to support ethical and effective practice.

- End of term gratitude and team building sessions.

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