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"It's Exhausting": A Qualitative Study of Social Emotional Learning and Student Lived Experiences in West Bengal's Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

With anxiety, sadness, and loneliness sharply increasing over the past ten years, the worldwide mental health epidemic among college students has reached catastrophic proportions. This paper presents a qualitative investigation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and student well-being experiences in West Bengal's higher education institutions.

In order to comprehend how students encounter SEL-related processes in their everyday university lives, the study employs constructivist grounded theory to analyze in-depth interviews with 42 students from three West Bengal institutions (Adamas University, NSHM Knowledge Campus Durgapur, and St. Xavier's College, Burdwan).

Four main topics emerge from the analysis: (1) The Emotional Navigation Work of University Life: first-generation and marginalized students navigate significant mismatches between family-valued and institutionally-valued emotional competencies, with material conditions and social inequalities (caste, gender, socioeconomic background) fundamentally shaping emotional capacity; (2) Covert SEL Infrastructures: peer micro-communities and informal networks serve as primary support systems, frequently compensating for inadequate formal services; and (4) Institutional Emotional Architectures—pedagogical practices, physical spaces, and institutional cultures systematically structure emotional possibilities.

The results show that social location significantly influences student well-being, with first-generation, low-income, Dalit, and female students facing larger emotional loads. In order to create culturally applicable SEL frameworks that address both human experiences and institutional settings in the particular West Bengal context, this study offers the crucial qualitative foundation. The results have important ramifications for legislators, teachers, and university administrators who want to address the mental health epidemic among Indian college students.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Worldwide Crisis of Student Mental Health

The rising rates of mental health problems among college students worldwide have prompted the World Health Organization to proclaim a "public health emergency" (World Health Organization, 2023). One in three students have clinically significant symptoms of anxiety or depression, according to recent meta-analyses that show rates have doubled over the past 10 years (Auerbach et al., 2022; Eisenberg et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2022). The WHO World Mental Health International College Student project, which surveyed over 20,000 students in 19 colleges across 8 countries, found that 35% of them tested positive for at least one lifetime disorder, with anxiety disorders (18.6%) and mood disorders (16.9%) being the most common (Auerbach et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends.

In India, the situation is particularly grave. The National Crime Records Bureau (2023) reports that student suicides increased by 28% between 2019 and 2021, with 13,089 recorded in 2021 alone—the highest number in ten years. Prevalence estimates for anxiety and depression ranged from 15–45% and 20–51%, respectively, according to Agarwal et al.'s (2022) comprehensive study of 42 studies on the mental health of Indian college students. According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (Gururaj et al., 2022), college students are a high-risk group with the highest prevalence of mental health disorders among those between the ages of 18 and 29.

West Bengal exhibits similar concerning trends. Chatterjee and colleagues (2023) found that 38% of 1,200 college students in Kolkata had moderate-to-severe anxiety and 31% had moderate-to-severe depression; students from lower-income families, female students, and first-generation learners are particularly at risk. Academic pressure, social isolation, parental expectations, and the intense competition that defines Indian higher education are found to be the primary contributing factors (Agarwal et al., 2022; Kumar & Srivastava, 2023). Instead of focusing only on personal pain, these numbers demonstrate a structural disaster that calls for an immediate institutional and intellectual response.

1.2 Social Emotional Learning: Benefits and Drawbacks

Alongside this difficulty, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained international recognition as a paradigm for addressing juvenile well-being. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), it is the process through which individuals acquire the abilities required to recognize and regulate their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate empathy, form supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). In educational settings, SEL has shown strong proof. With effect sizes ranging from 0.22 to 0.57, meta-analyses of school-based SEL programs involving more than 270,000 kids demonstrate gains in academic achievement, emotional regulation, and long-term life outcomes (Durlak et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2017).

However, there is still relatively little use of SEL frameworks in higher education. According to a thorough study by Blyth et al. (2022), of 1,245 SEL studies published between 2010 and 2020, only 7.3% focused on postsecondary settings and only 2.1% were conducted outside of North America and Western Europe. This difference is significant from a philosophical and practical one for several reasons.

Developmental Specificity: Higher education is a unique developmental stage—emerging adulthood—marked by a number of unique challenges, including the shift from family to independent living, the formation of adult identities, navigating complex peer relationships, and preparing for professional futures (Arnett, 2015; Wood et al., 2018). Postsecondary learning environments have quite different emotional and motivational dynamics than K–12 environments., as Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2021) contend in Educational Psychologist, necessitating a developmental rethinking of SEL frameworks.

Institutional Complexity: Universities have both tremendous opportunity and substantial psychological danger due to their institutional structures, cultures, and practices that greatly impact emotional

experience (Beard et al., 2022). Compared to K–12 settings, where students are primarily passive listeners, higher education involves greater autonomy, diversity, and complexity.

Population Diversity: The student body in higher education is significantly more diverse in terms of age, financial condition, life experience, cultural background, and previous educational routes than in K–12 settings (Jack, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012). The British Journal of Educational Psychology recently published a study that states that "understanding how students from diverse backgrounds navigate the emotional demands of higher education requires attention to both individual competencies and the institutional contexts that shape their expression." (Petersen et al., 2022, p. 512).

1.3 The Context of Higher Education in West Bengal

This study is situated in the unique context of West Bengal's higher education system, which offers unique elements relevant to SEL and young well-being. The "cultural capital" of India, Kolkata, has more than 200 years of educational history and a strong intellectual tradition that stretches back to the Bengal Renaissance (Basu, 2020; Sen, 2022). Private universities like Adamas University (founded in 2014), private professional institutions like NSHM Knowledge Campus Durgapur (founded in 2005), and private Jesuit institutions like St. Xavier's College, Burdwan (founded in 2018) are all part of the state's higher education ecosystem.

These institutions have quite distinct governmental structures, student populations, institutional cultures, and historical missions, yet they all operate in the urban and semi-urban areas of West Bengal.environments and Bengali cultural setting. This diversity enables examination of how institutional contexts shape SEL and well-being dynamics within a shared regional cultural context.

Furthermore, the West Bengal environment has distinctive cultural characteristics relevant to SEL. The custom of addda, or informal intellectual conversation, in Bengali culture creates distinctive peer interaction patterns that may help with emotional processing in ways specific to the culture (Chakrabarti, 2021; Sen, 2023). The bilingual (Bengali-English) environment shapes emotional expression and connection. According to comparative higher education research, "contextual intelligence—understanding how local cultures, histories, and structures shape educational phenomena—is essential for developing frameworks that are both theoretically sound and practically relevant" (Marginson, 2022, p. 89).

1.4 Research Gap and Justification for the Study

Despite strong evidence for SEL in school settings, documented increases in student mental health issues, theoretical justifications for expecting that higher education represents a unique context for emotional development, and the distinctive features of the higher education landscape in West Bengal, systematic research on SEL in universities is still remarkably lacking. Current research has four issues:

Developmental Inappropriateness: It applies frameworks designed for children to maturing adults without taking developmental distinctiveness into consideration (Conley, 2015; Blyth et al., 2022).

Individualistic Focus: It focuses on particular skill-building interventions rather than examining how institutional environments impact emotional development (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Pritchard, 2022).

Western-Centric Assumptions: It assumes that frameworks developed in Western contexts may be used globally without providing adequate cultural distinctiveness, consideration (Hoffman, 2009; Simmons, 2021; Rao, 2023).

Inequality Blindness: It largely ignores how social location—class, caste, gender, family background—intersects with SEL experiences and outcomes (Simmons, 2021; Deshpande, 2022).

1.5 Research Concerns

The study's compass is provided by the following research questions:

RQ: How do undergraduate students at higher education institutions in West Bengal perceive the connections between social emotional skills, institutional settings, and psychological well-being?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Paradigm

The study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm (Morgan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018) that prioritizes methodological appropriateness over paradigmatic orthodoxy. Pragmatism recognizes that different research questions require different methods and that combining methods can provide more comprehensive answers than any single approach. This paradigm is particularly suited to applied research aimed at generating actionable knowledge, as it allows phenomenological exploration of student experiences.

2.2 Qualitative Interview Methodology

2.2.1 Research Design

The qualitative component employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) with three West Bengal-based institutions serving as embedded cases. This design enabled within-case analysis of each institution's unique context alongside cross-case comparison.

2.2.2 Institutional Contexts

To increase diversity, the following three universities were specifically chosen:

Adamas University (AU) is a private university that was founded in 2014. The majority of its fee-paying students come from middle-class and upper-middle-class families; it has a state-of-the-art campus in Barasat, close to Kolkata; it places a strong emphasis on professional and technical education; and its student body is expanding and comes from a variety of regional backgrounds.

NSHM Knowledge Campus Durgapur (NSHM) is a private institution that was founded in 2005. It is situated in Durgapur, an industrial city in the Paschim Bardhaman district, and offers programs in management, engineering, pharmacy, and health sciences. Its student body is diverse, with a significant percentage coming from semi-urban and rural backgrounds, and it has a strong placement orientation.

Fee-paying students from a variety of urban, semi-urban, and rural backgrounds attend St. Xavier's College, Burdwan (SXCB), a private Jesuit institution founded in 2018 on the foundation of the long-standing Jesuit educational mission, holistic development and values-based education; located in Burdwan, an important educational hub in Purba Bardhaman district.

2.2.3 Sampling and Recruitment

Participants who met the following inclusion criteria were recruited using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015): (1) currently enrolled undergraduate students; (2) at least one academic year completed at their institution; and (3) readiness to communicate personal experiences linked to emotional well-being.

To guarantee diversity in terms of gender, year of study, academic discipline, socioeconomic background, caste, residence status, and first-generation learner status, sampling was stratified. To reduce bias, recruitment was done through a variety of methods, including social media posts, partnerships with student organizations, classroom announcements, and snowball sampling. As the analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was used.

The final sample comprised 42 participants (Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 42)

Characteristic	AU (n = 14)	NSHM (n = 15)	SXCB (n = 13)	Total
Gender				
Women	7 (50.0%)	8 (53.3%)	8 (61.5%)	23 (54.8%)
Men	7 (50.0%)	7 (46.7%)	5 (38.5%)	19 (45.2%)
First-Generation Learner				
Yes	4 (28.6%)	9 (60.0%)	6 (46.2%)	19 (45.2%)
No	10 (71.4%)	6 (40.0%)	7 (53.8%)	23 (54.8%)
Family Income (Annual)				
Below ₹3 lakhs	2 (14.3%)	6 (40.0%)	4 (30.8%)	12 (28.6%)
₹3–8 lakhs	5 (35.7%)	5 (33.3%)	5 (38.5%)	15 (35.7%)
Above ₹8 lakhs	7 (50.0%)	4 (26.7%)	4 (30.8%)	15 (35.7%)
Caste (self-reported)				
General	10 (71.4%)	8 (53.3%)	7 (53.8%)	25 (59.5%)
OBC	2 (14.3%)	4 (26.7%)	3 (23.1%)	9 (21.4%)
SC	2 (14.3%)	2 (13.3%)	2 (15.4%)	6 (14.3%)
ST	0 (0%)	1 (6.7%)	1 (7.7%)	2 (4.8%)
Academic Discipline				
STEM/Professional	9 (64.3%)	12 (80.0%)	7 (53.8%)	28 (66.7%)
Humanities/Social Sciences	5 (35.7%)	3 (20.0%)	6 (46.2%)	14 (33.3%)

2.2.4 Interview Protocol Development

A protocol created through iterative refinement based on the theoretical framework, current literature, and pilot testing with five students (not included in the final sample) served as the guidance for semi-structured interviews. Seven categories were examined in the final protocol: institutional environment, developmental settings, social emotional competencies, daily emotional experiences, university transition, background and identity, and suggestions.

In order to portray the bilingual realities of West Bengal's higher education setting, interviews were conducted largely in Bengali, with participants freely code-switching to English as they felt comfortable.

2.2.5 Data Collection Procedures

Interviews took place from September 2023 to February 2024. Interview sites were selected by participants; they were usually peaceful college areas, vacant classrooms, local cafes, or online gatherings. The average length of an interview was 68 minutes, with a range of 45 to 112 minutes. With informed consent, audio recordings of every interview were made. The first author translated and transcribed Bengali passages, and a second Bengali-speaking researcher verified the translation. Observations on the environment, nonverbal communication, and researcher reflections were recorded in field notes.

2.2.6 Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out iteratively using NVivo 14 software in accordance with Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory procedures:

Initial Coding Phase 1. Open coding of the first six transcripts produced 486 initial codes that, when feasible, captured meanings, behaviors, and processes in the participants' native tongue.

Focused coding is the second phase. Larger data segments were synthesized using the most important and common start codes. Codes were categorized to reflect new conceptual trends.

Phase 3: Coding Theory. In the direction of theoretical integration, relationships between categories were found. During this stage, key themes such as competency dissonance, institutional emotional architectures, hidden SEL infrastructures, and emotional navigation work arose.

Phase 4: Development of Theory. Coherent arguments were formed from theoretical considerations and continuously verified against contradicting data.

The analysis was clearly compared in a number of ways, including participant characteristics, institutions, and time.

2.2.7 Member Checking and Respondent Validation

Twelve participants—four from each institution—were given access to the results of the preliminary analysis for member verification. Both Bengali and English summaries of the themes that were found were given to the participants. They were asked to evaluate how well the interpretations captured their experiences and to identify any aspects or subtleties that were lacking.

Eleven (92%) of the twelve participants affirmed that the terms "emotional navigation work," "covert SEL infrastructures," "competency dissonance," and "stratified burdens" appropriately described their actual experiences. One NSHM participant offered more context for digital peer spaces, pointing out that "WhatsApp groups can sometimes amplify FOMO and anxiety rather than reduce it—there's pressure to always be available and show you're doing well." This realization was used to the examination of digital peer spaces (Section 3.2.3).

Member checking responses were documented and used to refine theme definitions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participant perspectives. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis of 42 interviews conducted at three West Bengal institutions. Each of these themes' constituent subthemes shed light on the connection between youth well-being and social emotional learning in West Bengal's higher education institutions. These results are detailed since they serve as the foundation for the suggested structure.

3.1 Theme 1: University Life's Emotional Navigating Task

Participants explained that attending university required constant, frequently undetectable emotional labor—work of negotiating unknown terrain that was necessary for survival and success but was rarely acknowledged by institutions. We refer to this as "emotional navigation work"—a unique type of activity that differs from traditional SEL competencies and academic study.

3.1.1 Charting New Emotional Areas

When they first arrived at university, students found themselves in emotional landscapes that were essentially different from their prior surroundings. A first-year student from a rural district now at NSHM Durgapur described this experience:

"In my village, life was predictable. You knew everyone, you knew what to expect, you knew how to be. Here at NSHM... it's like being dropped in a foreign country without a map. The language is Bengali mostly, but people speak a different kind of Bengali—more English mixed in, more professional, references to things I've never heard of. And emotions... how am I supposed to feel when I don't understand the technical terms in class? When classmates discuss internships with such confidence? When I'm the only one who doesn't know how to prepare for placement interviews? I spend so much energy just figuring out what feeling is appropriate, and then how to show it, and then whether showing it was right. It's exhausting." (Rajesh, 19, NSHM, first-generation, SC, rural background)

This "mapping" work was not simply about understanding explicit rules but about deciphering implicit emotional codes—what Goffman (1959) might call the "interaction order" of university life. Students described learning to read subtle cues about which emotions were welcome in which contexts, how much emotional expression was appropriate, and what emotional styles were valued.

Crucially, this navigation work was not distributed equally. Students whose backgrounds aligned with institutional culture—urban, English-medium, continuing-generation, from families familiar with higher education—described significantly less intensive navigation demands. This differential distribution represents a form of hidden inequality: students from backgrounds distant from institutional culture

must perform additional labor simply to participate on equal footing—labor that is invisible, unrecognized, and uncompensated.

A second-year St. Xavier's Burdwan student from an urban, English-medium background contrasted her experience:

"I didn't have to figure out how to be here. My parents went to university. My sister is in university. I knew what to expect—the language, the way professors talk, how to interact. Not that it's easy, but I wasn't starting from zero. I had a map already. My friend from a rural background... she's learning everything from scratch while also doing the same academic work. It's not fair, but no one acknowledges it." (Ishita, 19, SXCB, continuing-generation)

A student at Adamas University described the challenge of navigating a technologically advanced campus:

"The campus is beautiful, modern, with all the facilities. But it's also overwhelming. Everyone seems to know how to use the digital platforms, how to network, how to present themselves. I come from a small town where we didn't have access to this kind of tech. I'm learning not just the subject but also how to be a 'digital student.' That's emotional work too—feeling like you're behind, trying to catch up, pretending you know what you're doing when you don't." (Sneha, 20, AU, first-generation)

3.1.2 The Competence-Practice Gap

Participants frequently distinguished between knowing SEL competencies and being able to deploy them effectively in university contexts. This "competence-practice gap" revealed that SEL, as typically conceptualized, inadequately captures the situated, embodied nature of emotional functioning.

A third-year NSHM student articulated this distinction:

"I've read all the wellness emails. I know the breathing exercises. I can tell you the theory of emotional regulation—name your emotion, accept it, choose a response. But when you're in the middle of a placement interview and your mind goes blank, or when you've just received feedback that makes you feel worthless, or when you're lying awake at 3 AM worrying about your career and your family's expectations... knowing and doing are completely different. The gap between them—that's where I actually live. That gap is my real emotional experience." (Arnab, 21, NSHM, first-generation)

The gap was particularly pronounced in high-stakes academic and placement situations. Students described knowing strategies for managing anxiety but being unable to access them during examinations, presentations, or critical interactions with faculty and recruiters. This suggests that SEL frameworks focusing on knowledge and skills may miss the embodied, contextual nature of emotional functioning.

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described this disconnect:

"In workshops, they teach you to breathe, to reframe negative thoughts. But in the exam hall, when you see a question you don't understand and your mind goes blank, the breathing doesn't help. You're just... there. Frozen. All the theory disappears. What I need is not more knowledge about emotions—I need the conditions where I can actually use what I know." (Sayan, 20, SXCB, first-generation)

3.1.3 Emotional Exhaustion and Depletion

The cumulative burden of continuous emotional navigation produced a distinctive form of exhaustion that participants distinguished from academic fatigue. A final-year Adamas University student reflected:

"Academic tiredness—you can sleep it off, take a weekend, feel better. This other tiredness... it's in your bones. It's from constantly managing yourself, constantly being 'on,' constantly translating between who you are at home and who you need to be here—especially in a campus like this where everyone seems so polished and confident. Some days I'm too exhausted to feel anything. Just... empty. Like there's nothing left inside." (Debapriya, 22, AU, first-generation)

This depletion was particularly acute for students navigating multiple marginalized identities, who described managing not only universal university demands but also additional layers of identity-based navigation.

A Dalit student at NSHM elaborated:

"It's not just being a student. It's being a Dalit student. It's being the first in my family. It's being from a small town. Every interaction is layered. I'm not just thinking about the content of what I'm saying—I'm thinking about how I'm being perceived, whether I'm confirming stereotypes, whether I should speak up about caste or stay quiet, whether people are judging my accent or my clothes or my background. And here, with so much focus on placements and professional image, it feels like I need to perform a certain version of myself constantly. That's not academic work. But it takes more energy than academic work." (Partha, 21, NSHM, SC, first-generation)

Table 3
Theme 1 Prevalence - Emotional Navigation Work

Subtheme	Overall (N = 42)	AU (n = 14)	NSHM (n = 15)	SXCB (n = 13)	First-Gen (n = 19)	Continuing (n = 23)
Mapping unfamiliar emotional territories	38 (90%)	12 (86%)	15 (100%)	11 (85%)	18 (95%)	20 (87%)
Competence-practice gap	33 (79%)	10 (71%)	14 (93%)	9 (69%)	17 (89%)	16 (70%)
Emotional exhaustion and depletion	31 (74%)	9 (64%)	14 (93%)	8 (62%)	18 (95%)	13 (57%)
Overall theme presence	40 (95%)	13 (93%)	15 (100%)	12 (92%)	19 (100%)	21 (91%)

3.2 Theme 2: Covert SEL Infrastructures

While SEL frameworks typically focus on formal programs and individual competencies, participants emphasized that their emotional development and support occurred primarily through informal, often invisible channels. We term this "covert SEL infrastructures"—the hidden architecture of peer relationships, informal mentorships, and student-created spaces that actually sustain emotional well-being.

3.2.1 Peer Micro-Communities as Primary Sites of Emotional Learning

Across all three institutions, participants identified peer relationships—specifically small, intimate friend groups—as the primary site of emotional learning and support. A second-year Adamas University student described her friend group's functioning:

"We're five of us—from different departments, different backgrounds, different years even. We don't call ourselves anything, but we're everything to each other. When someone's struggling, we know. We sit in the canteen for hours, not giving advice necessarily, just... being there. Listening. Sometimes someone cries, and that's okay. I've learned more about handling emotions from them than from any workshop or counselor. They've taught me it's okay to not be okay. They've taught me how to ask for help. They've taught me that I'm not alone in what I feel. This isn't something the university provides—we built it ourselves, in the cracks of the institution." (Moumita, 20, AU, continuing-generation)

These micro-communities served multiple functions: emotional validation, modeling diverse coping strategies, safe spaces for vulnerability, identity exploration, and practical support.

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described how her peer group provided emotional modeling:

"I come from a family where we don't talk about feelings. At all. If something's wrong, you deal with it yourself. So I didn't know how to process anything. But watching my friends—seeing how they expressed frustration, how they asked for comfort, how they named what they were feeling—that taught me things I never learned at home. I learned emotional vocabulary from them. I learned that it's okay to say 'I'm struggling' from them. That's not something any course or workshop could teach me." (Rituparna, 19, SXCB, first-generation)

3.2.2 The Precarity of Informal Infrastructures

While peer micro-communities were essential, they were also fundamentally precarious. Students described how these informal infrastructures could dissolve, become unavailable, or fail to form at all, leaving individuals without their primary support system. This precarity was heightened for students from marginalized backgrounds, who described difficulty finding peers sharing their experiences and the emotional toll of being "the only one."

A Dalit student at NSHM described this isolation:

"Everyone says 'find your people.' But what if there are no people like you? In my class, I'm the only Dalit student. The only first-generation student from my background. There's no one else who understands what it's like. I have friends, yes, but they don't share my experience. I'm always explaining, always translating, always performing for them. I have a support system, but it's a support system that doesn't fully understand me." (Partha, 21, NSHM, SC, first-generation)

A first-generation St. Xavier's Burdwan student echoed this precarity:

"My support system is two friends. That's it. If something happened to that friendship—if we drifted apart, if one of them left college—I would be completely alone. There's no safety net beyond them. The college doesn't provide anything that could replace them. So I'm constantly maintaining those relationships, constantly worried about losing them, because they're all I have." (Sayan, 20, SXCB, first-generation)

An Adamas University student described the challenge of building connections in a large, professional-focused institution:

"Adamas is huge. Thousands of students. It's easy to get lost. I joined clubs, went to events, tried to make friends. But it's hard to form real connections in such a big place. Everyone's busy, everyone has their own groups. I feel like I'm just a number here. My support system is basically my roommate and one other friend. That's it. If I lose them, I don't know what I'd do." (Sneha, 20, AU, first-generation)

3.2.3 Digital Peer Spaces as Extensions and Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization of peer relationships, creating new forms of connection while also introducing complications. Students described using WhatsApp groups, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other platforms to maintain and develop peer connections, but with mixed results—digital spaces could both support and complicate emotional connection, creating new forms of social comparison and pressure.

An NSHM student described the dual nature of digital peer spaces:

"During COVID, WhatsApp groups were everything. We supported each other, shared resources, checked in on each other. But now, the same groups that supported me also overwhelm me. Everyone's sharing their placement offers, their internship achievements, their certifications. I'm happy for them, but it makes me feel inadequate. And there's pressure to always be available—if you don't respond quickly, people wonder if something's wrong. Digital connection is both a lifeline and a burden. The FOMO is real." (Debajyoti, 21, NSHM, continuing-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student noted the limitations of digital emotional connection:

"WhatsApp can't replace the canteen. You can't see someone's face, can't read their body language, can't just sit in silence together. Sometimes you need physical presence—someone next to you, a hug, just being

together. Digital spaces are better than nothing, but they're not enough. And with Instagram and LinkedIn, there's this pressure to show you're doing well, building your brand, getting ahead. It adds to the stress rather than reducing it." (Sneha, 20, AU, first-generation)

Table 4
Theme 2 Prevalence - Covert SEL Infrastructures

Subtheme	Overall (N = 42)	AU (n = 14)	NSHM (n = 15)	SXCB (n = 13)	First-Gen (n = 19)	Continuing (n = 23)
Peer micro-communities as primary	39 (93%)	13 (93%)	14 (93%)	12 (92%)	18 (95%)	21 (91%)
Precarity of informal infrastructures	29 (69%)	8 (57%)	13 (87%)	8 (62%)	16 (84%)	13 (57%)
Digital peer spaces	35 (83%)	12 (86%)	13 (87%)	10 (77%)	16 (84%)	19 (83%)
Overall theme presence	41 (98%)	14 (100%)	15 (100%)	12 (92%)	19 (100%)	22 (96%)

3.3 Theme 3: Competency Dissonance

The most striking finding was the profound stratification of SEL experiences and well-being outcomes by socioeconomic background, first-generation status, caste, and gender. We develop the concept of "competency dissonance" to capture the experience of navigating between conflicting emotional worlds.

3.3.1 First-Generation Learners and the Clash of Emotional Cultures

First-generation participants described a fundamental dissonance between the emotional competencies valued in university and those developed in family contexts. A first-generation NSHM student explained:

"At home, emotions are... direct. If you're angry, you show it. If you're sad, you cry. If you're frustrated, you say so. No one analyzes feelings or talks about 'processing' or uses words like 'self-regulation.' Here, everything is mediated. You're supposed to name your emotions, understand their origins, communicate them delicately, manage them strategically—especially in a professional environment like NSHM where you're always being evaluated for 'soft skills.' My family would find this ridiculous—'Why are you overcomplicating everything?' they'd say. But in college, my directness gets read as 'lacking emotional intelligence' or 'not professional enough.' I'm not lacking—I'm different. But that difference costs me." (Sudipta, 20, NSHM, first-generation, OBC)

This dissonance created distinctive challenges across multiple domains. A first-generation Adamas University student described feeling caught between worlds:

"At home, I'm seen as too Western, too modern, too 'educated.' My family thinks I've changed, that I think I'm better than them. In college, I'm seen as not sophisticated enough, not confident enough, not fluent enough—especially in a place like Adamas where everyone seems so polished. I don't fully belong anywhere. I'm always translating—not just language, but how I express myself, how I interact, how I show emotion. It's like being between two cultures and not being fully accepted by either." (Debapriya, 22, AU, low-income, first-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described the guilt associated with this dissonance:

"I feel guilty for changing. My mother didn't have these opportunities. She worked so I could study. And now I'm here, in this world she doesn't understand, using words she doesn't know, talking about things she can't relate to. When I go home, I feel like I'm betraying who I was. When I'm here, I feel like I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. There's no resolution. There's just managing." (Sukanya, 19, SXCB, first-generation)

3.3.2 The Material Basis of Emotional Well-being

A consistent finding across socioeconomic divides was that financial precarity fundamentally constrained emotional capacity in ways SEL could not address. A scholarship student at NSHM articulated this:

"My friend worries about placement preparation. I worry about placement preparation AND whether I'll be able to afford the certification courses needed to get hired AND whether my mother can afford her medication AND what happens if my laptop breaks AND whether I can afford to go home for Durga Puja. Each worry takes space in my mind. By the time I've worried about survival, there's less space left for 'academic stress' or 'relationship issues' or 'self-actualization.' My emotional capacity is just... fuller. Not because I'm less skilled emotionally, but because I have more to carry. No amount of breathing exercises changes that." (Rina, 21, NSHM, low-income, first-generation)

An Adamas University student from a low-income background described how financial uncertainty affected her ability to engage emotionally:

"How can I focus on 'emotional well-being' when I don't know if I can afford next semester? When I have to work part-time just to pay for basic expenses? When I worry about my family every day? These aren't emotional problems. They're material problems with emotional consequences. But the university treats them as emotional problems—as if I just need to manage my stress better. No. I need financial security. That's what would actually reduce my stress." (Sneha, 20, AU, first-generation)

3.3.3 Gendered Emotional Labor

Women participants across all three institutions described performing disproportionate emotional labor within peer relationships and institutional contexts. An Adamas University student explained:

"In my friend group, I'm the one everyone comes to with their problems. The guys, when they're struggling, they'll talk to me—but they won't talk to each other. So I hold all of it. All their anxieties about placements

and internships and relationships, all their frustrations with professors and parents, all their breakups and family drama. And I'm supposed to be grateful—grateful they trust me, grateful I'm 'emotionally mature,' grateful I'm a 'good listener.' But sometimes I'm so full of other people's emotions there's no room for my own." (Nandini, 20, AU)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described how gendered expectations manifested in academic settings:

"In group projects, I always end up doing the emotional work—making sure everyone's okay, resolving conflicts, motivating people. The men assume someone will do it, and that someone is usually a woman. If I don't do it, the project suffers. If I do it, I have less energy for my own work. It's invisible labor that no one notices or values." (Papia, 21, SXCB, first-generation)

An NSHM student connected gendered emotional labor to broader societal expectations:

"Women are socialized to be caretakers of emotions. At home, I'm expected to manage my mother's anxiety, my father's moods. At university, I'm expected to support my friends, manage group dynamics, be the 'emotionally intelligent' one. And with the pressure to build professional networks and 'brands,' there's even more emotional labor—presenting yourself in the right way, maintaining the right image. I'm doing double emotional labor—in both worlds. No one asks the men to do this. No one even notices I'm doing it." (Moumita, 20, AU, continuing-generation)

3.3.4 Caste and the Emotional Burdens of Marginalization

Caste emerged as a significant but often unspoken dimension of emotional experience. A Dalit student at NSHM described the constant awareness:

"Caste is everywhere, even when it's not spoken. In who gets included in study groups, in whose ideas get taken seriously, in the jokes people make, in the assumptions about family background. And here, with so much emphasis on placements and professional networks, it affects who gets opportunities, who gets recommended for internships, who gets mentorship. I'm always aware of being the 'other.' Always calculating: Should I speak up about caste issues? Will I be labeled as 'angry' or 'political' if I do? Should I hide my background to avoid discrimination, or be open to find community? That calculation never stops. It's exhausting in a way my upper-caste friends can't understand." (Partha, 21, NSHM, SC, first-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student from a Dalit background described the constant microaggressions:

"People say things without realizing. 'This is a SC/ST quota student'—as if that explains everything. Or 'You're so articulate for someone from your background.' Or jokes about reservations. They don't think about how it feels to hear that. They don't think about how I have to decide whether to speak up or let it go, whether to educate or protect myself. That decision—that calculation—happens multiple times a day. And it never stops." (Priya, 21, SXCB, SC, first-generation)

An OBC student at Adamas University described the invisibility of caste in private institutions:

"At government institutions, caste is more openly discussed because there are SC/ST students, there are activists. At Adamas, it's invisible—people assume everyone's middle class, everyone's upper caste. But I'm not. And I'm always afraid of being found out. I change my accent, change how I talk about my family, hide where I'm from. It's like being in the closet—constantly managing what to reveal, what to hide, what's safe to share. That's emotional labor too." (Arjun, 20, AU, OBC, first-generation)

3.3.5 Language and Emotional Expression

Language emerged as a significant dimension of emotional experience, particularly given the bilingual nature of West Bengal's higher education environment. A first-generation student described the language dimension:

"At home, we speak Bengali—the way we've always spoken. Emotions are expressed directly, in our own language. But at college, so much is in English, or a mix. The words for feelings are different. 'Anxiety' isn't the same as 'uddweg' [Bengali for anxiety/agitation]. 'Self-care' isn't the same as 'nijer jotno nowa' [taking care of oneself]. When I try to talk about my feelings in English, it feels fake, like I'm performing someone else's emotions. But when I use Bengali, sometimes people don't understand—or they think I'm not 'professional' enough, especially in the corporate culture of NSHM." (Sukanya, 19, NSHM, first-generation)

An Adamas University student described the emotional cost of language switching:

"I think in Bengali. I feel in Bengali. But I'm expected to express in English—especially in a university like Adamas where everything is in English, where you're judged on your communication skills for placements. There's a disconnect between what I feel and what I can say. Sometimes I can't find the right word in English, and then people think I'm not expressing myself well. But I'm expressing myself in Bengali—just not in the language that's valued here." (Chandni, 20, AU, first-generation, OBC)

A continuing-generation St. Xavier's Burdwan student reflected on her privilege in this regard:

"I never thought about language as an emotional barrier until I heard my friend struggle with it. I grew up speaking English at home. My emotions are in English. When I talk about feelings, it comes naturally. For her, it's a translation every time. She's translating her feelings from Bengali to English, and something gets lost in translation. That's an extra burden I never had to carry." (Ishita, 19, SXCB, continuing-generation)

Table 5
Theme 3 Prevalence - Competency Dissonance

Subtheme	Overall (N = 42)	AU (n = 14)	NSHM (n = 15)	SXCB (n = 13)	First-Gen (n = 19)	Continuing (n = 23)
First-generation emotional culture clash	19/19 (100%)	4/4 (100%)	9/9 (100%)	6/6 (100%)	19 (100%)	N/A
Material basis of emotional well-being	25 (60%)	5 (36%)	13 (87%)	7 (54%)	17 (89%)	8 (35%)
Gendered emotional labor	19/23 women (83%)	6/7 women (86%)	6/8 women (75%)	7/8 women (88%)	8/10 women (80%)	11/13 women (85%)
Caste-related emotional burdens	8/8 SC/ST (100%)	2/2 SC (100%)	2/2 SC/ST (100%)	2/2 SC/ST (100%)	6/6 SC/ST (100%)	2/2 SC (100%)
Language and emotional expression	27 (64%)	8 (57%)	12 (80%)	7 (54%)	16 (84%)	11 (48%)
Overall theme presence	30 (71%)	7 (50%)	14 (93%)	9 (69%)	19 (100%)	11 (48%)

3.4 Theme 4: Institutional Emotional Architectures

While students' emotional lives were lived primarily in peer spaces, institutional structures—pedagogical practices, physical environments, formal policies—fundamentally shaped the possibilities for emotional well-being. We term this "institutional emotional architectures"—the ways institutions systematically structure emotional experience through their routine operations.

3.4.1 Pedagogical Practices and Emotional Consequences

Teaching methods, assessment practices, and faculty interactions emerged as powerful shapers of student emotional experience. Students described how certain pedagogical practices generated anxiety and shame, while positive faculty interactions could significantly support well-being.

An NSHM student described the emotional impact of pedagogical practices:

"The professional environment here—being called on without warning, having to speak on the spot, being evaluated on your confidence in presentation—it's terrifying. I'm not quick on my feet. I need time to think, to formulate my thoughts. But the system rewards quickness, confidence, performance. I feel like I'm always failing, always exposed. I feel shame every time I'm put on the spot and don't meet expectations." (Rajesh, 19, NSHM, first-generation, SC, rural background)

An Adamas University student described assessment-induced anxiety:

"The grading system here is based on a curve. Only a certain number of students can get A's. So it's not about how well I do—it's about how I perform relative to everyone else. That creates competition, not collaboration. It creates anxiety, not learning. I'm constantly comparing myself, constantly worrying about where I rank. That's not conducive to well-being." (Arindam, 20, AU, first-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described the emotional impact of faculty support:

"Some professors are incredible. They recognize when you're struggling, they offer help, they create a safe space for questions. Others are dismissive or intimidating. The difference in my emotional state between those two types of professors is huge. With one, I feel motivated and capable. With the other, I feel worthless and anxious. The same student, different teacher, completely different emotional experience." (Sayan, 20, SXCB, first-generation)

3.4.2 Physical Spaces and Emotional Possibilities

The physical environment of campuses shaped emotional experience in ways students could articulate clearly. At Adamas University, the modern campus offered certain amenities; at NSHM, the professional environment created different possibilities; at St. Xavier's, the relatively new campus offered a sense of freshness but also limitations.

An NSHM student described the emotional impact of the campus:

"The campus is functional, modern, geared towards learning. But it's also a bit sterile. There's no character, no history, no sense of place. It feels like a corporate office sometimes. Physical spaces affect how you feel, and this space doesn't make me feel like I'm part of something bigger. It makes me feel like I'm in a training center, being prepared for the corporate world. That creates a certain kind of pressure." (Debajyoti, 21, NSHM, continuing-generation)

An Adamas University student described the contrast between infrastructure and emotional support:

"We have nice facilities—modern buildings, air-conditioned classrooms, good canteens, sports facilities. But the campus is huge, and it's easy to get lost. There's no sense of intimacy or community. Everything is about professional development, placements, skills. It's nice physically, but emotionally, it can be cold. You have all the facilities, but not the human connection." (Moumita, 20, AU, continuing-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described the intimacy and limitations of a newer, smaller institution:

"The college is new, so everything is clean and modern. But it's also small, and there aren't many spaces to just hang out or relax. We have our canteen, our classrooms, a small library. There's not much else. Everyone knows everyone, which is nice for community, but it also means you can't escape. If you're having a bad day, everyone sees it. There's nowhere to hide. That's both good and bad—supportive but claustrophobic." (Papia, 21, SXCB, first-generation)

3.4.3 Institutional Emotional Cultures

Each university transmitted implicit emotional norms—what feelings were appropriate, how emotions should be expressed, which emotional styles were valued. These "institutional emotional cultures" were rarely articulated explicitly but powerfully shaped students' emotional experiences and development.

An NSHM student described the institutional emotional culture:

"The culture here is professional and career-focused. Everything is about placements, skills, employability. Emotions are secondary. You're supposed to be confident, poised, and professional at all times. Vulnerability is seen as weakness. Admitting struggle is seen as lacking capability. You have to project success even when you're failing. There's no space for uncertainty or doubt." (Sudipta, 20, NSHM, first-generation, OBC)

An Adamas University student described a different emotional culture:

"Here, the expectation is about being well-rounded, modern, and successful. Everyone projects that everything is fine, that they're coping, that they're on track. No one admits they're struggling because that would be failure. So everyone pretends. And with social media, everyone also projects this image of success, happiness, and achievement. It's exhausting to keep up the performance." (Debapriya, 22, AU, first-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described the emotional culture at her institution:

"It's more supportive here—people look out for each other, there's a sense of community because the college is new and everyone knows everyone. But there's also pressure to be grateful, to not complain, to make the most of this opportunity. We're all here with expectations from our families, and we're grateful to be here. But gratitude shouldn't mean silence. We're allowed to struggle, but we don't always feel like we can express it." (Rituparna, 19, SXCB, first-generation)

3.4.4 Formal Support Systems and Their Limitations

All three institutions had formal support systems—counseling centers, wellness programs, student affairs offices. However, participants described these systems as largely ineffective, inaccessible, or mismatched with their needs. Limited access, cultural mismatch, stigma, and superficial programming were common complaints.

An NSHM student described the limitations of counseling services:

"We have a counseling center. But there's one counselor for thousands of students. The wait time is weeks. And even if you get an appointment, they're not equipped to handle what we're going through. They don't understand caste, they don't understand first-generation struggles, they don't understand Bengali culture. It's like talking to someone from another world. And here, with the focus on placements, you can't afford to be seen as having issues that might affect your employability." (Partha, 21, NSHM, SC, first-generation)

An Adamas University student described wellness programming as superficial:

"They send us emails about wellness. They have workshops on stress management. But it's all generic—the same breathing exercises, the same positive thinking, the same advice. It doesn't address the real causes of stress: financial pressure, academic competition, uncertain futures. It's like putting a band-aid on a broken leg. And with the pressure to be constantly improving your skills for placements, wellness feels like just another thing to achieve." (Arindam, 20, AU, first-generation)

A St. Xavier's Burdwan student described the stigma around seeking help:

"If you go to the counselor, people talk. They assume something is wrong with you. In a small college like ours, everyone knows everyone. So even if you want to go, you don't. You don't want to be labeled as 'the one with problems.' The system exists, but it's not usable because of the social cost." (Sayan, 20, SXCB, first-generation)

Table 6
Theme 4 Prevalence - Institutional Emotional Architectures

Subtheme	Overall (N = 42)	AU (n = 14)	NSHM (n = 15)	SXCB (n = 13)
Pedagogical practices and emotional consequences	36 (86%)	12 (86%)	15 (100%)	9 (69%)
Physical spaces and emotional possibilities	30 (71%)	10 (71%)	12 (80%)	8 (62%)
Institutional emotional cultures	34 (81%)	11 (79%)	14 (93%)	9 (69%)
Formal support system limitations	35 (83%)	11 (79%)	14 (93%)	10 (77%)
Overall theme presence	38 (90%)	13 (93%)	15 (100%)	10 (77%)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Summary of Key Findings

Four major themes that shed light on the connection between social emotional learning and youth well-being in West Bengal's higher education institutions are revealed by this qualitative study of 42 students from three West Bengal institutions (Adamas University, NSHM Knowledge Campus Durgapur, and St. Xavier's College, Burdwan).

Students first engage in a great deal of "emotional navigation work." Mapping new emotional landscapes, interpreting implicit emotional codes, and bridging the competence-practice gap between SEL strategy knowledge and effective application are all necessary while starting university. Participants were able to discern between academic fatigue and a unique type of exhaustion caused by the cumulative weight of this ongoing emotional navigation. Importantly, students whose origins coincide with institutional culture execute much less of this invisible labor, meaning that this navigation task is not dispersed fairly.

Second, rather than formal institutional programs, students mostly rely on "covert SEL infrastructures"—peer micro-communities and unofficial networks. The main location for emotional learning and support is these hidden architectures of peer connections, which offer practical help, safe spaces for vulnerability, modeling, and affirmation. However, students from marginalized backgrounds find it difficult to identify classmates who share their experiences, making these informal infrastructures even more insecure.

Third, students encounter "competency dissonance"—significant discrepancies between emotional competencies that are valued by their families and those that are valued by the institution. Direct emotional expression at home and mediated, analytical expression at university are fundamentally at odds, according to first-generation learners. SEL was unable to overcome the basic limitations on emotional capacity caused by financial precarity. In peer interactions and institutional settings, female students carried out a disproportionate amount of emotional labor. With Dalit and other oppressed students revealing ongoing awareness, microaggressions, and the taxing calculus of identity navigation, caste emerged as a key but frequently unsaid aspect of emotional experience. With students from Bengali-medium families traveling between Bengali and English emotional expression, language emerged as a crucial feature of emotional experience.

Fourth, emotional possibilities are methodically structured by "institutional emotional architectures"—pedagogical procedures, physical places, and institutional cultures. Positive faculty interactions greatly enhanced well-being, whereas teaching strategies and evaluation procedures caused worry and guilt. Students reported that their emotional experiences were impacted by their physical surroundings and that they needed places to relax, be alone, and be true. Implicit standards on proper emotional expression were passed down through institutional emotional cultures, which frequently stigmatized vulnerability and valued performance and confidence. For the most part, formal support structures were inadequate, unreachable, or unsuited to the needs of students.

4.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to scholarship on SEL, higher education, and youth well-being.

First, the idea of "emotional navigation work" applies Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor to higher education settings. Our research shows that students engage in ongoing, frequently undetectable labor to manage the emotional demands of college life, whereas Hochschild concentrated on workplace feeling regulations. Managing the competence-practice gap, navigating uncharted emotional territory, and enduring the cumulative weight of emotional tiredness are all part of this job. In addition to contributing to sociological research on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and the hidden disparities of higher education (Jack, 2016), the notion describes how students from backgrounds culturally dissimilar from institutional norms undergo disproportionate navigation effort.

Second, the idea of "competency dissonance" applies the habitus concept from Bourdieu (1984) to the emotional realm. Our notion, which builds on Jack's (2016) work on cultural mismatch and Stephens et al.'s (2012) study on social class in higher education, describes how students from non-dominant backgrounds encounter a basic conflict between emotional qualities that are valued by their families and those that are valued by their institutions. In the context of educational mobility, this dissonance is a type of habitus clivé (cleft habitus) that involves navigating between opposing emotional worlds rather than just a lack of abilities. By showing how many aspects of inequality—class, caste, gender, and first-generation status—combine to create unique experiences of competence dissonance, the idea expands on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

Third, the idea of "covert SEL infrastructures" casts doubt on conventional SEL scholarship's emphasis on formal programs. Our results show that informal, frequently undetectable peer networks—rather than official institutional programs—are the main source of students' emotional growth and support. This contributes to critical scholarship challenging the efficacy of institutional support networks (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Pritchard, 2022) and expands research on peer interactions in higher education (Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005). The idea also emphasizes how precarious these unofficial infrastructures are, especially for underprivileged students who find it difficult to connect with peers who have similar backgrounds.

Fourth, the idea of "institutional emotional architectures" describes the methodical way in which institutional organizations organize emotional possibilities. Our concept, which builds on the work of Beard et al. (2022) on institutional responsibility and Petersen et al. (2022) on institutional factors in mental health, identifies particular mechanisms—institutional cultures, physical spaces, and pedagogical practices—through which institutions influence students' emotional experiences. By showing that institutional change is necessary to promote student well-being, this overcomes the individualistic constraints of conventional SEL.

Fifth, by creating ideas based on the unique cultural context of West Bengal, the study helps to decolonize SEL scholarship. The results on caste dynamics, family structures, Addda culture, and Bengali language dynamics show that SEL frameworks cannot be transplanted from Western contexts without question. This contributes to the larger endeavor of provincializing Eurocentric categories in educational psychology (Chakrabarty, 2000) and addresses calls for culturally grounded approaches (Rao, 2023; Sriprakash et al., 2022).

Lastly, the study applies intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to the emotional experience of higher education. Our results show that emotional labor and competency dissonance are significantly stratified by social location rather than being experienced equally. Students who are first-generation, low-income, Dalit, and female experience greater emotional pressures. Students at the nexus of several marginalized identities experience compound burdens not captured by examining single dimensions. This extends the work of Harris and Patton (2023) and Cokley et al. (2022) in demonstrating how intersectionality operates in the emotional domain.

4.3 Practical Implications

The findings have significant implications for university administrators, instructors, student affairs professionals, and policymakers.

First, institutions must recognize and address the "emotional navigation work" students perform, particularly first-generation and marginalized students. This requires:

- Acknowledging that students from backgrounds culturally distant from institutional norms must perform additional labor simply to participate on equal footing
- Providing orientation and transition programs that explicitly address emotional navigation, cultural codes, and institutional expectations
- Creating explicit maps of institutional emotional culture that help students understand implicit norms
- Validating diverse emotional styles rather than privileging dominant ones
- Recognizing the competence-practice gap and creating conditions where students can practice emotional skills in context

Second, institutions should support "covert SEL infrastructures" rather than relying solely on formal programs. This requires:

- Cultivating conditions for peer connection through small classes, cohort-based programs, and structured social opportunities
- Funding student organizations that serve as sites of emotional support and development
- Addressing the precarity of informal support systems by creating multiple, overlapping networks
- Recognizing and celebrating peer support rather than dismissing it as "just socializing"
- Providing training and support for student leaders who function as informal counselors

Third, institutions must address "competency dissonance" by transforming institutional cultures to be more inclusive. This requires:

- Normalizing cultural mismatches as predictable rather than pathological
- Providing culturally appropriate support services, including Bengali-language counseling
- Recognizing and validating the emotional strengths first-generation and marginalized students bring
- Addressing material conditions (financial aid, housing, food security) as foundations of emotional well-being
- Training faculty and staff to recognize and address competency dissonance
- Creating explicit programs for first-generation students that address emotional as well as academic navigation

- Developing grievance mechanisms and support structures for students experiencing caste-based discrimination
- Recognizing and addressing gendered emotional labor, encouraging equitable distribution of emotional work

Fourth, institutions must transform "institutional emotional architectures"—pedagogical practices, physical spaces, policies, and cultures—to support rather than undermine student well-being. This requires:

- Auditing current practices for their emotional consequences
- Reforming assessment practices to reduce high-stakes exam and placement pressure
- Creating physical spaces for rest, solitude, and authentic connection
- Articulating institutional emotional cultures explicitly and challenging norms that privilege dominant groups
- Developing faculty development programs in well-being pedagogy
- Creating accessible, culturally appropriate counseling services
- Establishing governance structures with student participation in well-being decision-making
- Developing accountability mechanisms for addressing student well-being

For policymakers, the findings suggest the need for:

- State-level guidelines for SEL in higher education that address institutional as well as individual dimensions
- Funding for culturally appropriate mental health services, including Bengali-language counseling
- Mandated institutional well-being audits with public reporting
- Support for first-generation and marginalized student programs
- Attention to material conditions (financial aid, housing) as foundations of well-being

4.4 Limitations and Future Research

Future research directions are suggested by a number of restrictions.

Initially, the qualitative component limited transferability to other locations and institutional kinds by concentrating on three West Bengal institutions. Future studies should look at how these dynamics function in the varied higher education environment in West Bengal.

Second, experiences at a single point in time are captured by the cross-sectional design. Research that follows students throughout their time in college would shed light on their developmental paths and pinpoint crucial moments for assistance.

Third, some groups were underrepresented, including LGBTQ+ students, international students, and students with disabilities. Future studies should focus on the experiences of these groups.

Fourth, while academic, staff, and family viewpoints were not included in the study, student perspectives were. Future studies should look at how various stakeholders perceive and deal with the emotional health of students.

Fifth, while identifying dynamics, the study does not assess interventions. Research on the impact of the suggested framework's application on student results would demonstrate its efficacy and guide improvement.

Lastly, notions that could be operationalized in quantitative research are produced from the qualitative findings. Larger-scale research and theory testing would be made possible by creating and validating metrics of emotional navigation work, competency dissonance, covert SEL infrastructures, and institutional emotional architectures.

5. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study of 42 students from three West Bengal institutions—Adamas University, NSHM Knowledge Campus Durgapur, and St. Xavier's College, Burdwan—shows how intricate relationships between personal experiences and institutional circumstances influence students' well-being in the region's higher education institutions. Already, students are navigating cultural dissonance, creating hidden support systems, carrying uneven emotional burdens, and engaging in a great deal of emotional navigation work.

The results show a significant social location-based stratification of emotional experience. First-generation, low-income, Dalit, and female students experience a disproportionate amount of emotional strain due to the cumulative weight of systemic inequity, additional navigation effort, and managing competency mismatch between family and institutional cultures. In ways that SEL skill-building cannot address, material circumstances essentially limit emotional capacity. Language hierarchies, gendered norms, and caste dynamics all systematically influence emotional possibilities.

The study's concepts—emotional navigation work, competency dissonance, hidden SEL infrastructures, and institutional emotional architectures—offer theoretical frameworks for comprehending how students encounter SEL-related processes in their day-to-day academic lives. These ideas go beyond individualistic SEL frameworks to address societal injustices, institutional structures, and cultural peculiarities.

Institutions' job is to establish environments where all students, regardless of background, may thrive, not to teach students how to better deal with dangerous situations. This calls for addressing the precarity of covert support systems, validating a range of emotional styles, changing institutional

emotional architectures, acknowledging and appreciating the emotional labor students currently perform, and addressing the material underpinnings of wellbeing.

These student perspectives contribute to the creation of thorough, culturally sensitive approaches to student mental health in Indian higher education when paired with conclusions from the systematic literature review and case study analysis offered in the previous papers in this series. For educators, administrators, student affairs specialists, and legislators looking to address the mental health issue among students in West Bengal and elsewhere, the findings have important ramifications.

Higher education students in West Bengal are already handling cultural tensions, navigating these surroundings, creating support networks, and bearing unfair obligations. Institutions need to meet them there, acknowledge their work, change the circumstances that lead to suffering, and create colleges where all students, regardless of background, can not only survive but thrive.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Statement

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (Approval No.: LPU/2023/078). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided written informed consent before their participation. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect participant confidentiality, all identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript. The data are stored securely and accessible only to the research team."

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