



Mental Health And Happiness In Higher Education: A Critical Review Of Employee Well-Being In Indian Universities

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Abstract: Mental health and happiness have increasingly emerged as central concerns in organisational studies, with higher education institutions representing a unique and often under-examined domain. This paper reviews and critically analyses research on the mental health and happiness of university employees, with a special focus on findings from recent empirical work in West Bengal. Drawing upon theories of wellbeing, workplace psychology, and organisational behaviour, the review situates university employees' experiences within broader discourses on employee welfare and institutional development. The paper highlights how structural conditions—such as job designation, gender, contractual status, and workload—mediate variations in mental health outcomes and perceived happiness. Notably, it revisits the paradoxical negative correlation between mental health and happiness identified in the West Bengal study, positioning it against global scholarship where positive associations typically dominate. Methodological considerations, policy implications, and contextual factors such as socio-cultural expectations, resource constraints, and post-pandemic pressures are foregrounded. By consolidating insights from Indian and international studies, this review underscores the urgent need for integrated wellbeing frameworks in higher education. It concludes with recommendations for policy reform, organisational interventions, and directions for future research that could advance a holistic understanding of employee wellbeing in the academic sector.

Keywords: Mental health, Happiness, Higher education, Workplace wellbeing, University employees, India

I. INTRODUCTION

The intertwined concerns of mental health and happiness have in recent decades emerged as pivotal in discourses on workplace wellbeing. Across diverse professional contexts, the growing emphasis on psychological health reflects the recognition that employee welfare is not merely a matter of individual satisfaction but a determinant of organisational effectiveness and social progress. Universities, in particular, present a distinctive case in this discourse. They are simultaneously centres of knowledge creation, teaching, and administration, and they embody highly stratified institutional hierarchies involving faculty, administrative staff, and non-teaching employees. The complexities of workload, status differences, contractual arrangements, and expectations for productivity often place employees in environments where stressors are abundant and wellbeing is compromised (Corpuz, 2023).

The higher education sector in India has undergone significant transformation in the past two decades. Expansion of institutions, heightened demands for accountability, contractualisation of employment, and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the experiences of employees (Bashir et al., 2021). For many non-teaching staff, who constitute the administrative backbone of universities, such changes have intensified workload pressures while offering limited opportunities for professional growth and recognition. It is within this complex context that the study of mental health and happiness among university employees becomes urgent and relevant.

Banerjee's (2023) doctoral research on the mental health and happiness of non-teaching employees in West Bengal provides an instructive case for situating these concerns. His empirical investigation of 328 employees across multiple public universities found notable variations in mental health outcomes and happiness levels, alongside a paradoxical negative correlation between the two constructs. This counterintuitive finding, diverging from much of the global scholarship that emphasises positive correlations, calls for a closer examination of contextual factors, cultural dimensions, and methodological choices in understanding employee wellbeing.

The purpose of this review paper is threefold. First, it consolidates theoretical and empirical perspectives on mental health and happiness at work, with a particular emphasis on higher education. Second, it critically examines the findings from West Bengal in relation to global and Indian studies. Third, it outlines policy and institutional recommendations for fostering wellbeing in universities. By doing so, the paper not only reviews existing knowledge but also extends the discussion toward contextualised, culturally responsive frameworks for employee wellbeing in Indian academia.

Wellbeing in higher education is not a matter of individual flourishing alone. It has profound implications for institutional efficiency, community building, and national development. When employees are mentally healthy and happy, they are more likely to be productive, cooperative, and resilient (Kun & Gadanez, 2022). Conversely, when wellbeing is neglected, organisations face higher turnover, absenteeism, and reduced performance (Lu et al., 2022). For universities, these outcomes affect the quality of student services, research productivity, and administrative efficiency, all of which are central to their mission.

Against this background, it is essential to revisit foundational concepts of mental health and happiness, to review global and regional literature, and to interpret empirical findings critically. The following section examines the major theoretical frameworks that have shaped contemporary understandings of wellbeing, thereby providing a lens through which later empirical studies, including Banerjee's (2023), can be analysed.

1. Theoretical Framework of Wellbeing

2.1 Hedonia and Eudaimonia

At the heart of scholarly inquiry into wellbeing lies a long-standing debate between hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. Hedonia, rooted in the traditions of philosophers such as Heraclitus and Epicurus, associates happiness with pleasure, comfort, and the maximisation of positive affect (Sihvola, 2008). By contrast, Eudaimonia, advanced most prominently by Aristotle, frames wellbeing as the pursuit of meaningfulness and virtue, emphasising the actualisation of human potential and the cultivation of purpose

(Seligman, 2008). These dual perspectives continue to influence contemporary models of wellbeing, shaping how psychologists, educators, and policymakers conceptualise and measure mental health and happiness.

In the workplace, hedonic wellbeing often translates into job satisfaction, affective states, and immediate experiences of comfort or joy. Eudaimonic wellbeing, however, is associated with deeper constructs such as autonomy, mastery, personal growth, and contribution to organisational goals. Studies have increasingly shown that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive but interdependent, requiring integrated frameworks for a holistic understanding of wellbeing (Waterman, 1984; Ryff, 1989).

2.2 Positive Psychology and the PERMA Model

The emergence of positive psychology at the turn of the millennium further transformed the discourse on wellbeing. Martin Seligman (2002, 2011) argued for shifting psychology's focus from illness and deficits to strengths, flourishing, and human potential. His PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) became one of the most influential frameworks for conceptualising wellbeing.

The PERMA model is particularly relevant to workplaces. Positive emotion aligns with job satisfaction; engagement captures the flow employees experience in challenging yet manageable tasks; relationships highlight collegiality and social support; meaning reflects the sense of contributing to larger institutional goals; and accomplishment underscores recognition and achievement. Together, these components frame wellbeing as multi-dimensional, offering organisations practical entry points for interventions. Universities, with their combination of intellectual labour, administrative complexity, and interpersonal networks, present fertile grounds for applying and testing the PERMA framework.

2.3 Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Model

Carol Ryff (1989) developed another influential model of psychological wellbeing that diverges from hedonic definitions. Her six-factor framework emphasises self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. This model draws explicitly on Aristotelian eudaimonia, positing that wellbeing arises not from transient pleasures but from the cultivation of enduring virtues.

Applied to higher education employees, Ryff's model underscores the importance of autonomy in administrative and academic roles, the mastery of complex institutional environments, and the pursuit of purposeful contributions. Employees who feel empowered to shape their work environments, maintain positive relationships, and continue personal growth are likely to experience higher levels of wellbeing.

2.4 Composite Wellbeing and the Mental Health Continuum

Recent scholarship has sought to integrate hedonic and eudaimonic approaches through composite measures. Keyes (2007) proposed the Mental Health Continuum (MHC), which distinguishes between emotional wellbeing (hedonic), psychological wellbeing (eudaimonic), and social wellbeing. The short-form version (MHC-SF) has become a widely used instrument, including in Banerjee's (2023) study of West Bengal employees. By operationalising wellbeing as a continuum rather than a binary, this framework acknowledges that individuals can experience flourishing, moderate wellbeing, or languishing.

The composite approach has two key advantages for workplace research. First, it provides a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing across multiple domains. Second, it aligns with resilience-based

approaches, recognising that individuals may oscillate between different states depending on life circumstances and institutional environments.

2.5 Oxford Happiness Inventory and Related Measures

Parallel to the development of wellbeing models, psychometric instruments have been designed to measure happiness. The Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) and its derivatives, including the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), are widely employed to assess subjective happiness (Hills & Argyle, 2002). These instruments operationalise happiness through items measuring life satisfaction, positive affect, and absence of negative emotions.

Banerjee (2023) employed the OHQ alongside the MHC-SF, thereby combining measures of happiness and mental health in his study. This methodological choice not only allowed for comparative analysis but also highlighted tensions between constructs that are theoretically expected to correlate positively. The surprising negative correlation observed in his findings raises questions about cultural interpretations of happiness, contextual stressors, and the adequacy of measurement tools in Indian settings.

2.6 Emerging Models: Centeredness Theory and Multidimensional Approaches

More recent frameworks, such as Centeredness Theory (Bloch-Jorgensen et al., 2018), adopt systems-based approaches to wellbeing. They conceptualise wellbeing across domains of self, relationships, family, work, and community, emphasising balance and integration. Similarly, multidimensional psychological wellbeing (MPWB) models combine feeling good with functioning well, highlighting factors such as aspirations, life control, and sense of purpose (Vanhoutte, 2014).

These models underscore the contextual and relational nature of wellbeing. In universities, where employees' experiences are shaped not only by work demands but also by familial responsibilities, community ties, and broader socio-economic conditions, such multidimensional approaches offer useful lenses.

2.7 Relevance to Higher Education Employees

The theoretical frameworks reviewed converge on a common theme: wellbeing is multifaceted, dynamic, and deeply embedded in social and institutional contexts. For university employees, this means that mental health and happiness cannot be reduced to individual traits or transient moods. They are outcomes of structural conditions (workload, job security, recognition), cultural expectations (gender roles, community obligations), and organisational climates (supportive or hierarchical).

By situating wellbeing within these theoretical traditions, the stage is set for reviewing empirical research. The next section turns to global studies on workplace wellbeing and happiness, tracing how findings from higher education contexts worldwide provide comparative insights for the Indian case.

2. Review of Global Literature

The study of mental health and happiness in workplaces has been a matter of scholarly interest across disciplines ranging from psychology and sociology to economics and organisational studies. Globally, research has demonstrated that the wellbeing of employees is strongly linked to productivity, organisational loyalty, and broader measures of social development. Universities, as unique workplaces, have been incorporated into this discourse with a focus on academic staff, administrative employees, and the wider institutional community.

3.1 Workplace Wellbeing and Organisational Performance

International evidence consistently highlights that employee wellbeing is not merely an ethical concern but a strategic determinant of organisational performance. Van De Voorde, Paauwe, and Van Veldhoven (2012), in a comprehensive review of 36 quantitative studies, demonstrated how happiness, health, and relational wellbeing intersect with organisational performance. They identified two competing perspectives: the mutual gains model, where employee wellbeing enhances organisational outcomes, and the conflicting outcomes model, where certain wellbeing aspects may clash with performance imperatives. Despite some trade-offs, the weight of evidence suggests that happier and healthier employees are more productive, committed, and innovative.

Boehm and Lyubomirsky (2008) added to this evidence by exploring whether happiness promotes career success. Their cross-sectional and longitudinal studies indicated that happiness is not merely a by-product of success but often precedes it, serving as a catalyst for improved workplace outcomes. This aligns with broader positive psychology literature that situates positive affect as a resource rather than an outcome.

3.2 Higher Education as a Distinct Workplace

Universities present a distinctive case due to their dual roles as sites of knowledge production and public service. Faculty face demands of teaching, research, and publication, while administrators and non-teaching staff shoulder responsibilities for governance, finance, and student services. Mark and Smith (2012) showed that occupational stress, job characteristics, and coping strategies significantly impact mental health and job satisfaction among UK university employees. Their findings revealed that high workloads, conflicting demands, and inadequate coping mechanisms contribute to stress, anxiety, and reduced job satisfaction.

Vivoll Straume and Vittersø (2012) distinguished between hedonic happiness and eudaimonic inspiration in the workplace, arguing that while hedonic happiness is rooted in comfort, eudaimonic inspiration is linked to personal growth and optimal functioning. Their study of 465 Norwegian employees suggested that complex work situations may reduce immediate happiness but increase inspiration, thereby contributing to long-term flourishing. For universities, this distinction is critical: academic staff may derive inspiration from challenging intellectual tasks, even if they report stress or reduced short-term happiness.

3.3 Organisational Support and Psychological Resources

The role of perceived organisational support (POS) and psychological capital (PsyCap) has been extensively studied in global contexts. Joo and Lee (2017), examining 550 South Korean employees, found that POS and PsyCap enhanced work engagement, career satisfaction, and subjective wellbeing. Work engagement mediated the relationship between PsyCap and career satisfaction, suggesting that organisational environments that invest in psychological resources can indirectly foster happiness. This resonates with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, where relationships, meaning, and accomplishment contribute to flourishing.

Kun and Gadanecz (2022) conducted a study on Hungarian teachers and found that psychological resources such as hope and optimism are key determinants of workplace happiness. Their findings underscore that individual traits interact with institutional structures to shape wellbeing. Such insights are transferable to higher education globally, where resilience, optimism, and organisational support determine how employees cope with structural challenges.

3.4 Wellbeing, Health, and Relational Dynamics

The global literature has also explored the relational aspects of wellbeing. Haar et al. (2019), in New Zealand, examined positive relational management (PRM) and found strong associations between relational dynamics and meaningful work. Their findings suggest that employee happiness is not only a matter of individual psychology but also of workplace culture and collegiality. Similarly, Wang, Xing, and Zhang (2021) demonstrated how organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) enhances positive emotions and quality of work life among Chinese hotel employees, with implications for higher education institutions where OCB plays a central role in collegial governance and teamwork.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented context for testing these dynamics. Bashir, Bashir, Rana, Lambert, and Vernallis (2021) found that the shift to online operations increased stress among higher education employees globally, particularly due to technological adaptation and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. This resonates with broader findings that wellbeing is contingent not only on individual factors but also on sudden structural disruptions.

3.4 Summary of Global Trends

From this overview, several themes emerge:

1. Wellbeing is both an ethical imperative and a strategic asset for organisations.
2. Happiness and mental health are intertwined with organisational performance, though the relationship may be complex and bidirectional.
3. In higher education, unique challenges such as research pressures, administrative workloads, and student engagement shape wellbeing outcomes.
4. Organisational support, psychological capital, and relational culture are consistent predictors of employee happiness.
5. Global crises such as COVID-19 have highlighted vulnerabilities and underscored the importance of resilience and institutional adaptability.

These insights establish a comparative framework for examining the Indian higher education sector, which operates within distinct socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions.

3.5 Review of Indian and Regional Studies

Research on workplace wellbeing in India has gained prominence only in recent decades, reflecting both global scholarly trends and local socio-economic transformations. The Indian higher education system, the third largest in the world, employs millions of academic and non-academic staff, yet systematic studies on their mental health and happiness remain limited compared to Western contexts.

3.6 General Trends in Indian Workplaces

Studies from various industries in India suggest that employee wellbeing is closely linked to organisational commitment and performance. Garg, Rastogi, and Paul (2009) found that psychological wellbeing significantly influences employee commitment across sectors such as banking and manufacturing. Pradhan, Panda, and Jena (2017) showed that employee wellbeing enhances psychological empowerment, with happiness serving as a mediator. Such findings highlight that wellbeing is not peripheral but central to organisational functioning in India.

Adnan Bataineh (2019), though working in the Jordanian pharmaceutical sector, resonates with Indian contexts by showing how work-life balance and happiness influence employee performance. In Indian service industries, similar patterns emerge: job satisfaction, work-life balance, and wellbeing are consistently tied to productivity and loyalty.

3.7 Higher Education in India

Within higher education, Indian studies have pointed to stress, workload, and organisational climate as key determinants of wellbeing. Aryan and Kathuria (2017) examined young employees in IT sectors, but their findings on psychological wellbeing—linked to health, satisfaction, and happiness—are transferable to higher education settings where young administrative staff face precarious conditions.

Meena and Agarwal (2014) studied organisational climate, job satisfaction, and happiness among educational institution employees. They found a positive correlation between organisational climate and job satisfaction but a surprising negative correlation between job satisfaction and happiness. This counterintuitive result parallels Banerjee's (2023) finding of a negative correlation between mental health and happiness, suggesting that structural and cultural factors in Indian workplaces may shape wellbeing differently than in Western contexts.

In Sri Lanka, Opatha and colleagues (2020) studied HRM practices and found significant positive impacts on employee happiness. While outside India, their findings resonate with South Asian contexts where HRM policies are often underdeveloped in universities. Indian institutions, similarly, face challenges in formalising wellbeing practices, making organisational culture a crucial determinant.

3.8 Studies Focused on Teachers and University Staff

Several Indian studies specifically address teachers and staff in higher education. Kun and Gadanez's (2022) Hungarian study on teachers has parallels in Indian research where workplace happiness is tied to psychological resources. In India, Tella et al. (2003) highlighted how macroeconomic fluctuations affect national happiness, implying that broader economic conditions influence university employees' wellbeing.

Al-Ali, Ameen, Isaac, and Mohammed (2019), in their work on the UAE, demonstrated the mediating effects of job satisfaction on employee performance. While not Indian, the relevance lies in comparable contexts of rapid institutional expansion and resource constraints. Indian universities face similar pressures, with job satisfaction mediating relationships between structural conditions and wellbeing.

Aghili (2008) explored the relationship between religious attitudes and employee happiness among Indian and Iranian professionals. The study found strong correlations between religiosity and happiness, underscoring the role of cultural and spiritual frameworks in shaping wellbeing. For Indian university employees, where cultural practices and religious identities often permeate workplace dynamics, such factors cannot be ignored.

3.9 Empirical Evidence from West Bengal

Banerjee's (2023) doctoral study remains one of the few systematic investigations of non-teaching university employees in India. Using the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), he studied 328 employees across public state universities in West Bengal. His findings revealed significant variations in mental health and happiness across gender, designation, educational qualification, and years of experience. Most strikingly, the study found a weak but negative

correlation between mental health and happiness, diverging from global patterns that typically show a positive relationship.

Banerjee's interpretation situates this anomaly within structural and cultural contexts. Employees may perceive happiness in terms of material stability or community relationships, even when their mental health is strained by workplace stress. Alternatively, mental health as measured by international instruments may not capture culturally specific dimensions of wellbeing, leading to apparent dissonance in correlations.

3.10 Summary of Indian and Regional Trends

The Indian literature, though less extensive than global research, highlights several recurring themes:

1. **Organisational climate and HRM practices** are central to employee wellbeing, with universities often lagging in formal mechanisms.
2. **Job satisfaction and happiness** may not correlate positively in Indian contexts, echoing Banerjee's paradoxical finding.
3. **Cultural factors**, including religiosity and community orientation, significantly shape perceptions of wellbeing.
4. **Economic and structural constraints**, such as contractual employment and limited resources, exacerbate stress and diminish mental health.
5. **Limited empirical studies on non-teaching staff** create a gap in knowledge that Banerjee's (2023) work begins to address.

3. Insights from the West Bengal Study

Banerjee's (2023) doctoral investigation offers a rare empirical lens on the wellbeing of non-teaching employees in Indian universities. His study surveyed 328 employees across public state universities in West Bengal using two validated instruments: the **Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF)** and the **Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ)**. The MHC-SF measured emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, while the OHQ assessed subjective happiness.

The descriptive analysis revealed **considerable variation in mental health and happiness across demographic and occupational categories**. Gender differences were evident, with male and female employees differing in dimensions of emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. Employment designation and level of responsibility also shaped wellbeing outcomes: higher-ranking employees often reported greater stress but not necessarily lower happiness. Educational qualifications and years of experience influenced perceptions of competence and autonomy, contributing to different mental health profiles.

The most striking and counterintuitive finding was the **weak negative correlation between mental health and happiness**. While global literature usually identifies a strong positive correlation between these constructs (Keyes, 2007; Seligman, 2011), Banerjee's results suggested that employees with higher mental health scores did not necessarily report higher happiness, and in some cases the relationship was inverse.

This paradox demands interpretation. Banerjee (2023) speculated that **cultural conceptions of happiness** might differ from those embedded in psychometric tools. In Indian contexts, happiness is often associated with familial stability, spiritual fulfilment, and social bonds rather than individual psychological states. Thus, even when employees reported moderate or low mental health (e.g., stress, lack of autonomy, or

institutional dissatisfaction), they might still describe themselves as happy owing to cultural or communal anchors. Conversely, those scoring high on mental health scales may set higher expectations for wellbeing and thus report lower happiness when those expectations are unmet.

The study also highlighted **institutional factors**, such as workload, contractual employment, and limited recognition, as mediators of wellbeing. Many employees experienced strain due to inadequate staffing and expanding responsibilities. Yet, happiness was often derived from secure employment in a competitive labour market or from collective solidarity within workplace communities.

In summary, Banerjee's (2023) work highlights the need for contextualised interpretations of wellbeing constructs in India. It challenges universalist assumptions that mental health and happiness are always positively correlated and invites deeper inquiry into cultural, social, and structural determinants of employee wellbeing.

4. Critical Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Reconciling the Paradox

The negative correlation between mental health and happiness reported by Banerjee (2023) raises critical questions about the universality of wellbeing models. One explanation may lie in the **measurement instruments**. The OHQ, developed in the UK, measures happiness largely in hedonic terms (positive affect, life satisfaction). The MHC-SF, by contrast, emphasises psychological and social wellbeing rooted in eudaimonic frameworks. It is possible that Indian employees experience wellbeing in ways not fully captured by these tools, leading to mismatches.

Another explanation concerns **cultural definitions of happiness**. Cross-cultural psychology has long noted differences between Western individualistic orientations and non-Western collectivist traditions. In collectivist contexts, happiness is often derived from relational harmony, family support, and community belonging (Aghili, 2008). In India, employees may define happiness in terms of familial achievements or community recognition, even when their personal mental health is under strain.

5.2 Structural Determinants

Universities in India, particularly public institutions, operate under resource constraints, bureaucratic pressures, and political interference. Non-teaching employees, who often serve as administrative backbones, face challenges of **workload, limited promotion opportunities, and precarious contracts**. These structural realities may erode mental health while leaving other sources of happiness intact. For instance, an employee may feel stressed and undervalued yet happy about job security in a region where unemployment is high.

5.3 The Role of Organisational Climate

Global literature underscores the role of organisational support and climate in fostering wellbeing (Joo & Lee, 2017; Haar et al., 2019). In the Indian context, studies such as Meena and Agarwal (2014) similarly point to organisational climate as a determinant of job satisfaction and happiness. Banerjee's (2023) findings reinforce this by suggesting that **lack of institutional recognition and support undermines mental health**, even when employees maintain subjective happiness through external anchors.

5.4 Methodological Considerations

A critical lens also highlights methodological issues. Banerjee's sample focused exclusively on non-teaching staff. While valuable, this excludes faculty members who may face different stressors such as research output expectations and teaching loads. Expanding samples to include diverse employee groups would offer a more comprehensive picture. Moreover, longitudinal studies could capture fluctuations in wellbeing over time, especially in response to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.5 Contribution to Scholarship

Despite these limitations, Banerjee's (2023) study makes significant contributions. It challenges dominant assumptions, enriches cross-cultural perspectives on wellbeing, and underscores the need for tailored interventions in Indian higher education. It also fills a research gap by focusing on non-teaching staff, who are often overlooked in wellbeing studies dominated by faculty perspectives.

5.6 Policy Recommendations and Practical Implications

The findings from West Bengal, alongside global and Indian literature, suggest several actionable recommendations for policymakers, university administrators, and stakeholders.

- *Institutional Wellbeing Policies*

Universities should adopt formal wellbeing policies that integrate mental health support, stress management programs, and recognition of employee contributions. Policies should move beyond ad hoc initiatives to systemic frameworks aligned with global best practices.

- *Counselling and Support Services*

Counselling centres within universities should be expanded to serve not only students but also employees. Confidential counselling, peer-support groups, and stress-relief workshops could mitigate mental health challenges.

- *Workload Management*

Redistribution of administrative responsibilities, recruitment of additional staff, and digitalisation of bureaucratic processes could reduce strain on non-teaching employees. Flexible work arrangements and recognition of overtime could also improve morale.

- *Training and Capacity Building*

Continuous professional development opportunities can enhance employees' sense of competence and growth, aligning with eudaimonic wellbeing models. Training in digital tools, management, and communication can also reduce stress associated with evolving workplace demands.

- *Cultural Sensitivity in Interventions*

Wellbeing programs should be designed with cultural sensitivity, recognising that happiness and mental health are experienced differently across contexts. Incorporating community-building events, family-inclusive policies, and culturally grounded practices can make interventions more effective.

- *Policy-Level Interventions*

At the national level, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Ministry of Education should prioritise employee wellbeing in higher education policies. Allocating dedicated funds for wellbeing programs,

mandating counselling services, and incorporating wellbeing metrics into institutional assessments could systematise reforms.

5. Conclusion

The wellbeing of university employees is not merely an incidental matter but a core concern for the sustainability of institutions and the vitality of higher education systems. Evidence from global studies affirms that the mental health and happiness of employees are intimately tied to productivity, commitment, creativity, and organisational performance. Within the Indian context, however, research remains relatively sparse, with most studies focusing on faculty members while the equally vital contributions of non-teaching and administrative staff remain under-examined. It is in this light that Banerjee's 2023 study of non-teaching employees in West Bengal acquires significance.

By revealing a weak negative correlation between mental health and happiness, the study not only complicates existing assumptions drawn from Western frameworks but also invites critical reflection on how wellbeing should be understood in the Indian workplace.

The paradoxical finding of an inverse relationship between mental health and happiness suggests that these constructs, while often assumed to be naturally aligned, may manifest differently across cultural and institutional contexts. In India, happiness is frequently linked to family stability, community belonging, or spiritual fulfilment, while mental health indicators tend to focus on individual autonomy, coping skills, and psychological resilience. Employees may therefore perceive themselves as happy because of strong familial or social bonds even while experiencing stress, anxiety, or lack of recognition at the workplace. This divergence highlights the need to interrogate the cultural assumptions embedded in psychometric tools such as the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire or the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form, both of which were developed in Western contexts and may not fully capture local experiences. The issue is not merely methodological but theoretical, as it points to deeper questions about whether wellbeing is best conceptualised as universal or context-dependent.

At the structural level, universities in India are marked by bureaucratic rigidity, resource scarcity, and increasing contractualisation of employment. Non-teaching employees are often expected to shoulder heavy workloads without adequate opportunities for professional growth or systemic recognition of their contributions. These conditions predictably undermine mental health, yet employees may still report happiness on account of job security in a labour market characterised by precarity. Such contradictions, while surprising, reflect the lived realities of workers who navigate the pressures of institutional survival while holding on to cultural and familial anchors of happiness. Banerjee's study is thus valuable not only for its empirical insights but also for the way it forces us to rethink established theories of wellbeing.

Nevertheless, important research gaps remain. The majority of studies in India continue to privilege teaching staff and neglect the large sections of employees who keep the administrative machinery of universities functioning. By focusing on non-teaching staff, Banerjee has taken a crucial step, yet there is still insufficient evidence from other states, from private universities, and from central institutions, all of which have distinctive cultures and practices. The absence of longitudinal studies also limits our understanding of how wellbeing evolves over time, particularly in response to systemic reforms such as the implementation of

the National Education Policy or the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-sectional surveys, while useful, offer only snapshots of employee experiences, whereas long-term tracking could reveal patterns of resilience, adaptation, or decline in mental health and happiness.

Another significant gap lies in the absence of culturally grounded measurement tools. Most existing instruments, including those employed in Banerjee's study, are Western in origin and rely on assumptions about individualism, autonomy, and affect that do not map neatly onto collectivist or communitarian societies such as India. There is a pressing need for the development of indigenous scales that can account for the role of religion, community networks, caste, and socio-economic conditions in shaping perceptions of happiness and mental health. Without such tools, researchers risk misinterpreting data or failing to capture nuances that are critical for meaningful interventions.

The intersectionality of wellbeing is also underexplored. Gender, caste, socio-economic status, and regional location all interact to shape how employees experience work and life. Women employees, for instance, often juggle professional and domestic responsibilities, which can exacerbate stress while simultaneously grounding happiness in family fulfilment. Caste hierarchies, still pervasive in Indian institutions, may contribute to marginalisation and exclusion that impact mental health. Regional disparities in resource allocation mean that employees in universities in less developed districts face challenges distinct from those in metropolitan centres. Research that fails to account for these intersecting factors risks producing generalisations that obscure lived complexities.

Looking ahead, the future scope for research in this field is both urgent and expansive. Comparative studies across different types of universities—state, central, and private—would generate a more nuanced picture of how institutional structures mediate wellbeing. Longitudinal research designs could capture the effects of policy reforms, technological changes, or crises on employee wellbeing over time. Cross-cultural studies could compare Indian contexts with other collectivist societies to refine theoretical models of happiness and mental health. Most importantly, interdisciplinary approaches are needed, drawing from psychology, education, sociology, anthropology, and public health to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding employee wellbeing.

On the policy front, research should also assess the effectiveness of interventions designed to promote wellbeing in universities. Pilot programmes offering counselling services, workload redistribution, or professional development opportunities could be systematically studied to evaluate outcomes. Such evidence-based approaches would provide policymakers with actionable insights rather than abstract recommendations. There is also scope for participatory research that involves employees themselves in designing and evaluating wellbeing initiatives, ensuring that interventions are grounded in actual needs rather than managerial assumptions.

Banerjee's study, despite its limitations, provides a starting point for these directions. It challenges the dominant assumption that mental health and happiness are positively correlated and demonstrates the necessity of contextualised approaches. By centring non-teaching staff, it brings visibility to a group whose wellbeing is often ignored despite their crucial role in the functioning of universities. Future studies can build upon this by expanding samples, diversifying methods, and incorporating cultural specificity.

The implications are far-reaching. A mentally healthy and happy workforce is essential not only for the functioning of universities but also for the broader project of national development. Universities are not isolated institutions; they are nodes in larger social and economic systems. When employees flourish, they contribute more effectively to the education of students, the production of knowledge, and the provision of services. Conversely, when wellbeing is neglected, the costs are borne not only by individuals but by institutions and society at large. Recognising this is therefore not simply an ethical obligation but a strategic imperative.

In conclusion, the future of higher education in India depends on a deeper commitment to understanding and fostering employee wellbeing. Research must move beyond imported models and isolated studies to embrace longitudinal, interdisciplinary, and culturally sensitive approaches. Only then can policies and interventions be designed that truly address the realities of Indian universities. The paradox revealed by Banerjee's study should not be seen as an anomaly but as a call to broaden our theoretical horizons and refine our methodologies. By embracing this challenge, scholars, policymakers, and institutions can work together to ensure that mental health and happiness are not distant ideals but lived realities for all university employees.

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