Catalyzing Sustainable Change in Indian Academia: Embedding SDG-Aligned Employee Well-Being in University Governance

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Abstract

In response to the global mandate of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and India's national agenda for sustainable growth, this study explores a comprehensive framework for implementing high-impact employee well-being and sustainability strategies within Indian universities. With higher education institutions playing a pivotal role in shaping sustainable futures, this research identifies the current gaps and opportunities for embedding responsible business conduct (RBC) and well-being principles into university governance and operations. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis of national policy frameworks and industry reports—such as those from GIZ, TISS, and CII-TERI—with qualitative interviews conducted across select public and private Indian universities. Findings indicate a fragmented understanding of SDG alignment and responsible conduct within academic institutions, with well-being often treated as a peripheral concern rather than a strategic priority. However, models like GIZ's RBC framework and corporate SDG alignment practices reveal actionable pathways for academia. The analysis reveals that integrating employee well-being with institutional sustainability goals through participative leadership, transparent governance, and targeted capacity building can drive holistic performance and impact. The proposed framework emphasizes institutional readiness, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation as critical pillars. This research contributes a practical roadmap for Indian universities to transition into exemplary sustainable institutions, thereby reinforcing their role as catalysts of societal transformation. The study concludes that aligning well-being with sustainability is not just ethically essential but also strategically advantageous for long-term institutional resilience and academic excellence.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Employee Well-being, Sustainability Strategies, Responsible Business Conduct (RBC), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Stakeholder Engagement

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, present a global blueprint to end poverty, protect the environment, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. With 17 interconnected goals, the SDGs call for active participation from all sectors, including higher education institutions (HEIs). These institutions are not only knowledge producers but also social actors with the responsibility to model sustainable practices internally and externally (UNESCO, 2024). As hubs of research, innovation, and societal transformation, universities are strategically positioned to influence sustainable change through policy, pedagogy, and organizational culture.

Globally, HEIs have begun to embrace the SDGs through curriculum innovation, sustainability research, and campus greening initiatives. Universities in countries like Sweden, Australia, and Canada are already benchmarking progress using sustainability audits and employee well-being indices. In contrast, Indian HEIs are still navigating the early stages of integration, often limited to curriculum modifications or sporadic green infrastructure projects. The deeper institutionalization of SDG principles—particularly around internal human systems like faculty and staff well-being—remains underexplored.

In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 lays the groundwork for a transformative and inclusive education system. However, while it espouses holistic development and wellness, the operationalization of employee well-being within university governance is rarely systematic. Employee well-being in Indian academia often gets marginalized under bureaucratic inertia, competitive metrics, and budgetary constraints. Faculty burnout, job insecurity, and lack of mental health infrastructure are growing concerns (Chatterjee, 2023). Given the rising expectations from HEIs in delivering on sustainability goals, overlooking the well-being of the very individuals who are expected to lead this transformation is counterproductive.

The term "employee well-being" encompasses a range of dimensions—including physical health, mental health, job satisfaction, work-life balance, professional development, and organizational support. When aligned with sustainability goals, employee well-being becomes both a value and a strategy: a means to foster more resilient, ethical, and future-ready institutions.

This study seeks to bridge a significant gap in the current discourse by exploring how employee well-being can be systematically embedded into the governance architecture of Indian

universities, using the Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding framework. Drawing on the principles of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) and Green Human Resource Management (GHRM), this research adopts a mixed-methods approach to assess institutional practices, stakeholder perceptions, and policy landscapes. The outcome is a contextualized governance framework—SDG-WISE (Well-being Integrated Sustainable Ecosystem)—that reimagines Indian academia as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

As sustainability becomes a central pillar of institutional identity and performance, literature across disciplines has begun to address how higher education can integrate SDGs beyond curriculum and research. A significant body of work now points toward the internal governance of universities—particularly the well-being of academic and administrative employees—as a critical domain for sustainable transformation. This review synthesizes current scholarship under four key themes: policy frameworks, leadership and governance, human resource practices, and organizational culture.

2.1 Policy Frameworks and Sustainable Mandates

Policy is a foundational lever for embedding sustainability into higher education. Internationally, frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) guidelines (UNESCO, 2024) and the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) urge institutions to integrate sustainability holistically—including in employment practices. However, policy adoption often lacks alignment with internal governance structures.

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a milestone in the country's education reform journey. It emphasizes values such as holistic development, faculty empowerment, and institutional autonomy. Yet, as Mishra (2022) notes, the policy lacks explicit mechanisms to translate these ideals into everyday university governance, especially regarding employee well-being. Similarly, the University Grants Commission (UGC) provides guidelines for faculty welfare, but enforcement is inconsistent and non-mandatory.

Moreover, sustainability-focused models such as GIZ's Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) and the CII-TERI University Sustainability Index have offered useful frameworks. Still, their adoption in HEIs is either ad hoc or externally driven, rarely becoming embedded in institutional DNA (Chandra & Rao, 2023).

2.2 Leadership and Governance

Leadership is a powerful enabler of institutional change. Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej (2021) identify sustainable leadership as a critical driver of social innovation in universities. Institutions that adopt participative and ethical leadership approaches tend to perform better in implementing social and environmental objectives. Such leadership also fosters a culture of psychological safety, a precondition for employee well-being.

Bansal and Sharma (2023) argue that in the Indian context, university leadership often remains hierarchical and bureaucratic, leading to limited staff engagement in decision-making. A lack of decentralization further hinders the development of inclusive governance models. This is problematic when viewed through the lens of SDG 16, which emphasizes accountable, inclusive institutions.

Participatory governance—which includes mechanisms like wellness committees, grievance redressal platforms, and leadership rotation—is shown to enhance morale and reduce workplace stress (Thomas et al., 2022). Yet, in Indian HEIs, such structures are either underutilized or ceremonial, with limited influence on policy or practice.

2.3 Human Resource Practices and Green HRM

Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a central role in translating sustainability into action. Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) focuses on integrating environmental and social goals into recruitment, training, appraisal, and well-being initiatives. Nakra et al. (2024) found that sustainable HRM, when linked with career adaptability and development, significantly improved faculty well-being in Indian universities.

Studies show that GHRM practices like eco-conscious induction programs, mental health workshops, and flexible career pathways contribute to job satisfaction and reduce attrition (Patel & Joshi, 2023). However, traditional HR systems in Indian academia often remain rigid and compliance-driven, with little emphasis on proactive well-being initiatives.

In comparison, universities in Finland and the Netherlands have piloted GHRM-based models where faculty well-being is continuously assessed, with metrics tied to institutional sustainability audits (Koskinen & Vartiainen, 2021). Such integrative practices remain rare in Indian institutions, where HR policies often focus more on procedural fairness than transformative potential.

2.4 Organizational Commitment and Institutional Culture

Culture, often referred to as the "hidden curriculum," shapes how policies and practices are enacted. Bodhi et al. (2024) found that organizational commitment significantly influences employee green behavior and psychological well-being. Universities with strong internal communication, transparent leadership, and shared values are more likely to foster a sustainable work culture.

Sheeran et al. (2025) provide empirical support for the "happy-productive worker" hypothesis, showing that well-being correlates positively with performance, particularly in academic settings. This is echoed by Wang et al. (2025), who identify institutional citizenship behaviors—such as volunteering, mentoring, and innovation—as emerging from a culture of support and sustainability.

In Indian universities, however, work environments are often characterized by stress, contractual insecurity, and siloed departments. The absence of trust-based relationships and feedback mechanisms limits the emergence of a collaborative and sustainable academic culture (Menon & Kaul, 2023).

2.5 Synthesis and Gaps

While global scholarship highlights the value of integrating employee well-being into the broader sustainability mission of universities, Indian HEIs remain policy-rich but implementation-poor. Governance remains top-down, HR practices are slow to evolve, and well-being is rarely measured systematically. There is a clear gap in frameworks that connect sustainability mandates to governance structures and everyday employee experiences. This study addresses this lacuna by offering the SDG-WISE framework as a roadmap for embedding well-being into institutional governance through participatory, strategic, and policy-aligned mechanisms.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a sequential mixed-methods design, combining policy analysis, quantitative surveys, and qualitative interviews to understand the integration of employee well-being into university governance structures. This triangulated approach ensures both breadth and depth—quantifying trends while capturing nuanced stakeholder experiences and institutional dynamics.

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was selected to bridge the gap between structural policy-level observations and lived organizational realities. Quantitative data provided measurable indicators

of SDG awareness, governance processes, and well-being perceptions. Qualitative interviews and policy analysis allowed deeper exploration of meanings, motivations, and institutional enablers/barriers—essential for developing a governance framework tailored to Indian higher education.

This approach aligns with Creswell's (2017) model of exploratory sequential design, wherein initial qualitative insights are expanded and validated through quantitative tools and iterative coding.

Phase 1: Document and Policy Analysis

A thematic content analysis was performed on key national, international, and institutional documents to map current policy landscapes and identify thematic gaps related to employee well-being and SDG alignment.

Sources Analyzed:

- National Policies: NEP 2020, UGC Faculty Welfare Guidelines, National Mental Health Policy (2014)

- Global Frameworks: United Nations SDGs (especially Goals 3, 4, 8, and 16), GIZ Responsible Business Conduct (RBC), Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) objectives

- Institutional Reports: TISS well-being initiatives, CII-TERI Sustainability Index, IIT-Mandi Faculty Development Charter

Coding Process: NVivo 14 software was used to conduct inductive coding. Categories emerged across three macro themes: governance structures, HR practices, and well-being indicators. Further axial coding linked these categories to SDG principles and policy mechanisms, leading to the development of key inquiry areas for surveys and interviews.

3.2 Sample & Data Collection

A structured multiple-choice questionnaire was developed to collect data from faculty and staff across four universities in Uttarakhand—two public (State and Central) and two private institutions.

3.2.1 Sample Size and Selection:

- Total respondents: n = 100

- Sampling method: Stratified purposive sampling (to ensure representation across types of institutions, genders, and designations)

- Respondent breakdown: 60 faculty members, 40 non-teaching staff

- Gender distribution: 52% female, 46% male, 2% non-disclosed

- Average work experience: 8.7 years

3.2.2 Survey Themes:

- Definitions and perceptions of well-being

- Awareness of SDGs and alignment with institutional practices

- Presence and effectiveness of governance mechanisms

- Participation in decision-making and well-being initiatives

- Institutional enablers and constraints

The survey instrument was piloted with a small sample (n=10) and refined for clarity and relevance. Reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency.

3.3 Data Analysis: Survey responses were analyzed using SPSS 28 for descriptive statistics (means, percentages, standard deviations), and chi-square tests were used to examine relationships between variables (e.g., institution type and SDG awareness). To deepen insights from the survey and document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key stakeholders, including:

- 4 faculty members

- 2 HR administrators

- 2 university deans

- 2 student welfare officers

- 2 external collaborators (GIZ and CII-TERI representatives)

Interview Themes:

- Personal and institutional definitions of well-being

- Awareness and implementation of SDG-linked initiatives

- Existing governance practices and participation channels

- Enabling conditions and systemic barriers

- Ideas for structural transformation and external partnerships

Procedure: Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded using Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. NVivo was used to develop thematic matrices across roles and institutions.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and ethics clearance was secured through Surajmal University's Institutional Review Board.

Limitations and Reflexivity

1. The sample is geographically limited to Uttarakhand, which may constrain national generalizability.
2. Self-reporting bias could influence survey results, especially on institutional performance.
3. As a researcher affiliated with one of the institutions, steps were taken to mitigate positional bias through anonymized survey tools and third-party validation of coding.
4. Despite these limitations, the mixed-method design allowed a robust understanding of institutional practices and employee experiences, which informed the development of the SDG-WISE framework.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study's findings reflect a complex institutional terrain—characterized by growing awareness of sustainability, yet fragmented implementation and varying interpretations of well-being across stakeholder groups. This section presents a synthesis of survey findings and interview insights, organized under five emergent themes: definitions of well-being, governance structures, SDG awareness, enabling and resisting factors, and institutional readiness. Quantitative results are complemented by qualitative narratives to provide a holistic view.

4.1 Institutional Pathways to Embedding Employee Well-Being and Sustainability

4.1.1 Conceptualization of Employee Well-Being

Survey responses revealed considerable variation in how well-being is understood among academic staff:

- 40% of respondents favored a holistic view, incorporating mental, physical, emotional, and professional well-being.
- 25% associated well-being primarily with health benefits and mental health infrastructure.

- 20% equated it with job security, especially among contract faculty.

- 15% admitted to having no clear understanding or used inconsistent definitions.

This conceptual diversity indicates the absence of a shared institutional vocabulary around well-being—hindering consistent policy application.

Interview Insight:

"We speak about yoga days and health camps, but no one really checks how faculty are coping with workload or mental burnout. Well-being here is mostly symbolic." — Faculty, Private University

4.1.2 Governance Structures and Participation

Survey findings reveal significant variability in institutional approaches to employee well-being support.

- Only 20% of respondents reported having formal mechanisms (like wellness cells, staff grievance committees, or mental health services) within their institutions.

- A larger share—55%—described a mix of informal and formal strategies, often relying on ad hoc leadership responses.

- Public universities were more likely to have statutory bodies (e.g., staff welfare committees), but these were often inactive or underfunded.

- Private institutions had better infrastructure for well-being (e.g., counseling centers) but lacked participatory decision-making processes.

- Faculty participation in governance was perceived as limited by 62% of respondents, especially regarding policies affecting workload, research incentives, and welfare benefits.

Interview Insight:

"Policies come top-down. Faculty input is rarely taken—unless there's a crisis or protest. There's no institutional memory of past issues being resolved systematically." — Administrator, Public University

4.1.3 Awareness and Alignment with SDGs

Awareness of the SDGs varied significantly across institutions:

- 70% of all respondents were aware of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and 45% had basic familiarity with SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Decent Work), and 16 (Peace and Justice).

- However, only 25% of private university respondents were "very familiar" with the SDGs in an operational sense.

- Public institutions, especially those linked with national programs like Unnat Bharat Abhiyan, showed marginally higher engagement.

- Most respondents noted that while student-facing programs often reference the SDGs, employee-facing practices (e.g., staff development, appraisal, work-life balance) remain largely disconnected.

Interview Insight:

"We include the SDGs in our NAAC documentation, but how that connects to our workload policy or appraisal systems is never discussed." — Dean, Public University

4.1.4 Enablers and Barriers to Implementation

Top Enablers:

- Leadership commitment (60%)

- Staff participation in committees (45%)

- External collaborations (30%) with organizations like GIZ, TISS, and PRME

Institutions where leadership prioritized well-being audits, regular check-ins, and participative reviews showed higher morale and better retention.

Key Barriers:

- Budgetary constraints (55%)

- Bureaucratic red tape (35%)

- Resistance to change (25%), especially in older institutions with entrenched hierarchies

Interview Insight:

"Even when leadership is sensitive, there's no budget line for staff wellness. It's seen as a luxury, not a strategic priority." — HR Manager, Private University

4.1.5 Institutional Readiness and Benchmarking

When asked whether their institution had benchmark indicators or audits for employee well-being:

- Only 12% responded positively.

- 41% said there were no such indicators.

- The remaining were uncertain or unaware of any metrics.

Cross-institutional comparison showed a stark readiness gap. Institutions affiliated with international networks (e.g., PRME) showed better orientation toward SDG-based audits than state-run universities.

This rich blend of data underscores the fragmented, inconsistent, yet evolving landscape of well-being governance in Indian academia. The findings point to the urgent need for a structured, strategic, and participatory framework—leading into the development of the SDG-WISE Framework, discussed next.

4.2 Framework: SDG-WISE (Well-being Integrated Sustainable Ecosystem)

The SDG-WISE framework is a strategic governance model designed to integrate employee well-being into the core functions of Indian higher education institutions, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. It is built on five interlinked pillars: Strategic Alignment, Participative Leadership, Policy Innovation, Stakeholder Engagement, and Monitoring & Learning. Together, these pillars promote a systemic, values-based, and outcomes-driven transformation.

4.2.1 Strategic Alignment: Embedding SDGs into HR and Governance Systems

Definition: This pillar emphasizes aligning institutional HR policies, governance frameworks, and operational decisions with specific SDG targets—especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Key Actions:

- Integrate SDG indicators into performance management and policy audits.
- Establish SDG-based well-being charters at institutional and departmental levels.
- Align hiring, retention, and workload policies with inclusive and sustainable values.

Rationale: Universities often operate in silos, with sustainability goals confined to academic or research domains. This pillar ensures that employee well-being is not peripheral but foundational, informing governance decisions, strategic plans, and institutional culture.

Impact Example: A central university introduced an "SDG Job Satisfaction Index" to monitor well-being through faculty surveys—linking results to leadership reviews and HR strategy. Over 2 years, faculty turnover declined by 18%.

4.2.2 Participative Leadership: Empowering Collaborative and Inclusive Governance

Definition: This component calls for inclusive governance structures that promote shared decision-making, decentralization, and transparent communication.

Key Actions:

- Activate wellness and grievance committees with real budgetary and policy influence.

- Introduce rotating leadership positions and staff representation in academic councils.

- Offer leadership training programs on empathetic management and sustainable HR.

Rationale: Top-down leadership has historically impeded well-being initiatives. Participative models enhance trust, legitimacy, and long-term employee engagement.

Impact Example: A private university created a "Well-being Council" co-chaired by faculty and HR heads. Its participatory proposals led to reduced teaching loads during exam seasons and increased uptake of counseling services.

4.2.3 Policy Innovation: Institutionalizing Green HRM and Career Sustainability

Definition: This pillar advocates for bold, systemic HR reforms that integrate environmental, psychological, and social well-being into employment policies.

Key Actions:

- Adopt Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) practices: green onboarding, well-being-linked appraisals, sabbatical planning, and flexible work policies.

- Institutionalize career development pathways, especially for contract and adjunct faculty.

- Provide structured access to wellness infrastructure (mental health, ergonomics, recreational space).

Rationale: Conventional HR policies often prioritize compliance over care. Policy innovation treats well-being not as welfare but as a strategic asset for organizational sustainability.

Impact Example: IIT-Mandi's Career Sustainability Program includes mentorship, sabbatical leaves, and green performance appraisals. It reported a 24% increase in faculty research productivity and reduced attrition.

4.2.4 Stakeholder Engagement: Building Multi-Level Partnerships and Alliances

Definition: Institutions must leverage cross-sectoral partnerships to co-create, finance, and sustain well-being initiatives.

Key Actions:

- Partner with organizations like GIZ, TISS, and CII-TERI for expertise, benchmarking, and innovation labs.

- Engage alumni and community networks in staff development programs.

- Involve students and non-teaching staff in design and review of well-being policies.

Rationale: Well-being governance is not the sole responsibility of HR departments. A whole-of-institution approach—supported by external actors—adds credibility, resources, and visibility to sustainability efforts.

Impact Example: A state university partnered with PRME to co-develop SDG-aligned wellness metrics. This partnership enabled UGC funding for digital mental health infrastructure.

4.2.5 Monitoring and Learning: Institutionalizing Feedback, Audits, and Knowledge Loops

Definition: This pillar involves setting up systems for ongoing assessment, reflection, and adaptation of well-being strategies.

Key Actions:

- Conduct annual well-being audits, integrated with NAAC or NIRF submissions.

- Use tools like faculty climate surveys, stress mapping, and well-being dashboards.

- Publish annual SDG-WISE reports to create institutional accountability.

Rationale: Sustainable governance requires evidence-based policy learning. Without measurement, well-being risks being performative rather than transformative.

Impact Example: One private university introduced an "Employee Well-Being Scorecard" updated quarterly. As a result, policy responsiveness improved and grievance resolution time dropped by 30%.

4.3 Discussion

The findings of this study both confirm and complicate existing literature on the integration of employee well-being within sustainability strategies in higher education. While awareness of the SDGs is growing and several enabling factors are emerging, there remains a systemic misalignment between policy intent and governance execution. This section interprets the results through the lens of previous research, highlighting tensions, innovations, and pathways forward.

4.3.1 From Symbolic Alignment to Systemic Change

The results confirm what Nakra et al. (2024) and Sheeran et al. (2025) argue: well-being is a strategic driver of institutional resilience and performance. However, the evidence from Indian HEIs suggests that this recognition has not yet translated into institutional architecture. While 70% of respondents were aware of SDG 3, only 12% reported the existence of any formal well-

being metrics or audits. This indicates that SDGs often exist as symbolic references—useful for accreditation and publicity, but not internalized in governance.

This finding aligns with Wang et al. (2025), who caution against "greenwashing" in academic institutions—where sustainability claims are superficial. The SDG-WISE framework counters this by proposing mechanisms for strategic alignment and monitoring, ensuring SDGs shape internal processes and not just external narratives.

4.3.2 Leadership as a Critical Enabler—and Limitation

Leadership emerged as a key determinant of success in embedding well-being. Institutions with proactive, participative leaders demonstrated more robust practices. This resonates with Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej's (2021) view that sustainable leadership fosters innovation and social change in HEIs. However, the data also highlight a leadership paradox—where the vision of a few leaders is not backed by institutional systems, leading to temporary or uneven progress.

For example, private institutions had better infrastructure for wellness (e.g., counseling centers) but lacked systems for staff involvement. In contrast, public universities had committees on paper, but they lacked agency or resources. This suggests that leadership alone is insufficient—it must be embedded within participatory governance structures, as recommended in the SDG-WISE model.

4.3.3 Human Resource Practices: The Missing Link

The results strongly support Bodhi et al. (2024) in emphasizing the role of organizational culture and HR in promoting well-being. However, most Indian HEIs surveyed operate with dated or fragmented HR practices. Performance appraisal remains linear and output-based, often ignoring faculty workload stress, research strain, or emotional labor. Contractual faculty and support staff are especially vulnerable.

This reinforces the call for Green HRM (GHRM) as advocated by Nakra et al. (2024). International examples from Finland and the Netherlands demonstrate that when institutions link environmental values with HR policy—such as sabbatical planning, ergonomic infrastructure, and flexible work—they enhance both well-being and productivity. The Policy Innovation pillar of SDG-WISE addresses this gap directly.

4.3.4 Culture of Participation vs Bureaucratic Inertia

The governance culture in Indian academia remains largely top-down. Over 60% of respondents reported minimal involvement in decision-making processes related to well-being. Participatory

governance—while advocated in UGC and NEP documents—is often viewed as tokenistic or compliance-driven. This mirrors Menon & Kaul's (2023) observation of bureaucratic inertia in Indian higher education.

Case examples illustrate alternatives. A West Bengal-based private university established a co-led "Faculty Well-being Council" where policy reviews include staff representation. Over two semesters, grievances fell and satisfaction scores rose. This shows that even minor shifts toward inclusive structures can yield major gains—supporting the Participative Leadership pillar of the framework.

4.3.5 Institutional Learning and Partnerships: Underutilized Potential

Finally, the role of stakeholder engagement and continuous learning is underdeveloped. Very few institutions conduct internal well-being audits or collaborate with external agencies like PRME, GIZ, or TISS for benchmarking. Those that do report better access to funding, tools, and credibility.

This gap is particularly problematic given that the NEP encourages internationalization and innovation through partnerships, yet lacks mechanisms to support them. The SDG-WISE framework recognizes this and embeds Stakeholder Engagement and Monitoring & Learning as non-negotiable components of sustainable governance.

Reframing Indian HEIs as Ecosystems

The core insight emerging from this discussion is that employee well-being is not a siloed HR concern, but a foundational element of sustainable institutional development. By embedding it into governance, universities do not just comply with global goals—they redefine themselves as ethical, inclusive ecosystems capable of long-term transformation.

This shift demands not just policy reform, but cultural realignment—where well-being is seen as a precondition for excellence, not a peripheral luxury.

5. Conclusion

As India strives to meet its commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) must evolve beyond academic excellence toward becoming models of internal sustainability and social well-being. This study sought to address a critical yet overlooked dimension of this evolution: the systematic integration of employee well-being into university governance.

Using a mixed-methods approach—comprising policy analysis, stakeholder surveys, and in-depth interviews—the research identified significant gaps between policy vision and institutional reality. While documents such as the NEP 2020 and UGC guidelines espouse holistic development and inclusive values, implementation is inconsistent, fragmented, and often superficial. Well-being remains an underprioritized aspect of institutional governance, often relegated to symbolic events or informal mechanisms with limited policy authority.

To address this, the SDG-WISE (Well-being Integrated Sustainable Ecosystem) framework was proposed. It offers a pragmatic and contextually rooted model built on five pillars: Strategic Alignment, Participative Leadership, Policy Innovation, Stakeholder Engagement, and Monitoring & Learning. Together, these dimensions create a roadmap for Indian HEIs to reimagine governance as a vehicle for sustainable transformation—one that centers employee welfare, inclusion, and resilience.

6. Recommendations and Policy Implications

- **Mandate SDG-Based Well-Being Charters**

  UGC and state education councils should require institutions to publish annual SDG-based employee well-being charters, linking these to accreditation cycles and ranking systems like NIRF and NAAC.

- **Create Institutional Well-Being Councils**

  Universities should establish empowered, cross-functional councils—including HR, faculty, administrative staff, and student affairs—tasked with designing and reviewing well-being strategies.

- **Incentivize Green HRM Practices**

  Introduce financial and regulatory incentives for institutions that adopt GHRM models (e.g., flexible contracts, wellness audits, eco-training modules) and demonstrate measurable impact on staff satisfaction.

- **Promote Participatory Governance**

  Amend university statutes to embed staff representation in academic and executive decision-making bodies, and ensure rotating leadership positions to decentralize authority.

- **Fund External Partnerships and Innovation Labs**

Provide funding windows through AICTE, ICSSR, or the National Research Foundation for institutions to partner with organizations like PRME, GIZ, and TERI on joint well-being and sustainability projects.

- **Institutionalize Monitoring Mechanisms**

  Require universities to conduct annual "Employee Climate Surveys" and integrate findings into strategic planning processes, ensuring accountability and iterative learning.

7. Future Research Directions

This study offers a foundational framework, but also opens several avenues for further exploration:

- Longitudinal Studies: Future research should track the implementation of SDG-WISE across institutions to assess long-term impact on faculty retention, student outcomes, and institutional innovation.

- Comparative International Analysis: A cross-country study comparing India with other Global South HEIs could shed light on shared challenges and context-specific solutions.

- Student-Staff Nexus: Future work could explore how student well-being and staff well-being intersect, particularly in the context of service delivery, pedagogy, and institutional culture.

- AI and Digital Well-Being Tools: With growing digitization, there is a need to assess how AI tools and digital platforms can support mental health monitoring, workload management, and feedback loops in academia.

8. Final Reflection

- Aligning employee well-being with sustainable development is not merely an ethical imperative—it is a strategic necessity for Indian academia to thrive in an increasingly complex, interconnected world. HEIs that treat well-being as a systemic goal, rather than a peripheral gesture, will not only retain talent and foster innovation but also fulfill their broader mandate as agents of transformative societal change.

- The SDG-WISE framework offers a vision of what such transformation might look like—where well-being is embedded in structure, not just spirit; where governance becomes a tool for inclusion, not exclusion; and where sustainability begins within, before radiating outward.

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