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Moving Beyond the Checklist: A Longitudinal Study on the Evolution of Mental Health Ecosystems in Indian Universities

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Abstract

Student mental health systems in Indian higher education have historically evolved through compliance-led mandates rather than cultural intent. Most institutions have focused on meeting minimum regulatory requirements, appointing counsellors, establishing helplines, and responding to crises, without embedding well-being into everyday campus life. As psychological distress among students rises, this reactive model has shown clear limitations. This longitudinal study examines how mental health ecosystems evolve when universities move beyond compliance towards a culture-based approach to care. Using aggregated, anonymised data from the Your DOST digital emotional well-being platform, the study tracks changes across 20 Indian universities over a 3-year period, comparing Year 1 and Year 3 post-onboarding. Five dimensions of cultural maturity are analysed: engagement and access, help-seeking maturity, preventive and self-driven care, peer community development, and well-being quality outcomes. The findings reveal a pronounced transformation across institutions. Average platform engagement more than tripled, help-seeking behaviour shifted from one-time crisis use to sustained engagement, and adoption of preventive self-care tools increased significantly. Most notably, the number of universities demonstrating high levels of cultural maturity, as measured by a composite Cultural Maturity Index (CMI), increased threefold within 3 years. These results suggest that well-being ecosystems can mature rapidly when supported by integrated digital infrastructure, peer-led initiatives, and a

framework that treats care as a shared cultural responsibility. The study offers a data-backed blueprint for universities seeking to move beyond checklist compliance and build resilient, student-centred cultures of care, particularly relevant in light of emerging national mandates on student mental health.

Keywords: Mental Health, Cultural Maturity, Digital Well-being, Help-Seeking Behaviour, Higher Education

Introduction: From Obligation to Ecosystem

For much of the past decade, student mental health in Indian universities has been addressed through a narrow compliance lens. Institutions have largely equated well-being with the presence of visible structures, counsellors on payroll, emergency helplines, and formal policies designed to signal readiness rather than enable lived care (Agarwal & Kumar, 2024; Chatterjee & Desai, 2025). While these measures satisfy regulatory expectations, they rarely shape how students actually experience support on campus.

This approach has proven to be inadequate. Psychological distress among Indian youth has increased steadily, driven by academic pressure, financial uncertainty, social isolation, and rapid socio-cultural change. When care systems are activated only after distress escalates into crisis, students often disengage early, seek help too late, or avoid formal channels altogether. In practice, compliance-oriented models risk reinforcing stigma rather than reducing it.

Since 2015, YourDOST has worked with higher education institutions across India to explore a different premise: that mental health cannot be enforced through policy alone; it must be normalised, made accessible, and embedded into campus culture. Over a decade of partnerships with more than 200 institutions has shown that meaningful transformation occurs when care shifts from being episodic and reactive to preventive, participatory, and community-driven (YourDOST, 2022).

Recent external developments have further underscored this need. The Supreme Court of India's directive mandating systemic mental health support in educational institutions marks a turning point in how student well-being is positioned nationally (25 July 2025, Sukdeb Saha v. State of Andhra Pradesh, LiveLaw (SC) 740 (2025)). While the ruling elevates mental health from a 'good practice' to a legal obligation, compliance alone does not guarantee impact. Institutions may meet prescribed standards without cultivating environments where students feel safe to seek help, sustain engagement, or support one another.

This study examines how universities evolve when mental health is treated not as an obligation, but as an ecosystem. Focusing on 20 diverse Indian universities that partnered with YourDOST, the research tracks changes over 3 years following platform onboarding. The analysis is grounded in

the Caring College Framework, a campus-wide model that integrates wellness across individual, peer, and institutional layers (Barnett et al., 2024; Bickerstaff et al., 2021).

Methods

Sample and Setting

The study draws on data from 20 Indian universities that partnered with YourDOST to implement a digital mental health and emotional well-being platform. The institutions represent a mix of geographies, institutional types, and student populations, including centrally funded technical institutions and large private universities. At the time of onboarding, participating universities demonstrated varying levels of existing mental health infrastructure.

Data were analysed at two fixed points: Year 1, covering the first 12 months following platform onboarding, and Year 3, covering the subsequent 12-month period after 3 years of continued engagement. This paired, longitudinal design allowed for within-institution comparisons over time.

Data Sources and Variables

Aggregated, anonymised platform metadata captured student engagement with counselling, self-help, and community-based well-being resources. Qualitative content analysis was used. To ensure analytical clarity and consistency, variables were organised across five dimensions of cultural maturity, each representing a distinct aspect of ecosystem evolution (Kulkarni & Shah, 2023). The five dimensions displayed in Table 1 collectively move the analysis beyond utilisation metrics, enabling assessment of how deeply care is embedded into campus culture.

Analytical Approach

Growth rates were calculated between Year 1 and Year 3 for key metrics. Institutions were mapped across help-seeking maturity stages using conversion and retention ratios. A composite Cultural Maturity Index (CMI) was developed by integrating weighted sub-indices across all five dimensions (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2022; Economic Times Bureau, 2023; Mpower, 2023).

Results: The Three-Year Transformation

Engagement and Access Growth

Across the 20 universities, total platform engagements increased by an average of over 200% between Year 1 and Year 3 (Table 2). Several institutions recorded growth exceeding 300%, accompanied by a substantial rise in unique student reach. Importantly, engagement density also increased, indicating repeat and sustained usage rather than one-time access.

Table 1: Dimensions of Cultural Maturity, Key Variables, and Cultural Significance

Dimension	**Key Variables**	**Cultural Significance**
Engagement & Access Growth	Total Engagements, Platform Sign-ups, Unique Students Engaged	Normalisation of support and reduction of stigma.
Help-Seeking Maturity	Counselling Sessions, Repeat Sessions, Session Retention Rate	Shift from forced or episodic use to sustained, intentional help-seeking.
Preventive & Self-Driven Care	Self-Assessments, Self-Help Resources Used, Journals Written	Student empowerment and ownership of well-being.
Community & Peer Ecosystems	Community Subscribers, Campus Care Champion Badges, Peer-Led Activity Index	Fostering belonging and shared responsibility for care.
Well-Being Quality Outcomes	Session Satisfaction Ratings ($\geq 3\star$), Average Session Duration	Perceived value, trust, and depth of care experience.

(Created for this study)

Table 2: Engagement and Access Growth Metrics Across Universities (Year 1–Year 3)

Organisation	**Engagement Growth (%)**	**Student Reach (%)**	**Engagement Rate (Y3)**
University 1	518.49	646.93	1.60
University 2	377.02	237.87	3.23
University 3	342.16	433.79	2.21
University 4	181.50	71.20	3.18
University 5	112.60	31.74	2.84
University 6	106.80	45.98	1.99
University 7	64.11	18.10	2.56
University 8	34.85	18.31	1.82
University 9	41.97	3.26	2.23
University 10	31.49	6.53	1.49

(Created for this study)

Help-Seeking Maturity

By Year 3, a clear shift was observed from crisis-driven engagement to sustained help-seeking behaviour (Table 3). While several institutions remained within the compliance stage, a growing number progressed into adoption and cultural maturity stages, marked by higher session retention and repeat engagement.

Table 3: Help-Seeking Maturity Quadrant Classification

Organisation	Quadrant
University 1	Culture
University 2	Culture
University 3	Adoption
University 4	Adoption
University 5	Adoption
University 6	Compliance
University 7	Adoption
University 8	Compliance
University 9	Compliance
University 10	Compliance

(Created for this study)

Preventive and Self-Driven Care

Adoption of preventive tools such as self-assessments, digital self-help resources, and reflective journaling increased across most institutions. This trend reflects a shift towards proactive mental health ownership among students.

Table 4: Preventive and Self-Driven Care Adoption Indicators (Year 1–Year 3)

Organisation	Self-Help Index (Y1)	Self-Help Index (Y3)	% Growth
University 1	9.1	9.5	+4.4%
University 3	24.7	29.4	+19.1%
University 7	19.7	14.6	-25.9%

Community and Peer Ecosystems

Peer-led initiatives and community participation expanded significantly in culturally mature institutions. Table 5 displays data from universities 1 and 7 as representatives. Growth in community subscribers and peer activity indices highlighted the role of shared responsibility and belonging in sustaining engagement.

Table 5: Community Ecosystem Formation Metrics

Organisation	Community Growth Rate (%)	Engagement Density (Y3)	Peer-Led Activity Index
University 7	1000.0	0.0082	0.33
University 1	-	0.0002	0.055

(Created for this study)

Cultural Maturity Index (CMI)

The study used the Cultural Maturity Index to track improvements (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2022; Economic Times Bureau, 2023; Mpower, 2023). By Year 3, the number of universities achieving high CMI scores (≥70) tripled compared to Year 1 (Table 6). These institutions demonstrated balanced performance across engagement, retention, prevention, and community dimensions.

Table 6: Cultural Maturity Index Rankings and Stage Classification

Organisation	CMI Score	Stage
University 1	92.7	Culture
University 2	85.2	Culture
University 3	77.4	Culture
University 4	71.8	Culture
University 7	63.9	Adoption
University 5	62.1	Adoption

(Created for this study)

Discussion: From Compliance to Culture

The findings demonstrate that universities can meaningfully transform their mental health ecosystems within a relatively short period when care is approached as a cultural system rather than a compliance requirement. Institutions that invested in integrated digital infrastructure, peer engagement, and preventive tools showed the strongest and most sustainable outcomes.

The results also align closely with emerging national expectations around student mental health. While regulatory mandates may catalyse action, this study shows that cultural maturity—not mere compliance—is what ultimately determines impact.

Conclusion

This study traces a clear transition in Indian higher education from checklist-driven mental health provision to culture-based ecosystems of care. Over 3 years, universities that embraced

integrated, preventive, and community-driven approaches demonstrated substantial improvements in engagement, help-seeking maturity, and well-being outcomes.

The evidence suggests that meaningful cultural change is both achievable and measurable. As institutions respond to heightened national expectations, the Caring College Framework and Cultural Maturity Index offer a practical roadmap for embedding mental health into the fabric of campus life.

Declaration of AI Assistance

Artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited capacity during the manuscript preparation, processing for language refinement and proofreading. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation of results, conceptual framing, or generation of original arguments. The authors retain full responsibility for the content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript.

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Richa Singh is the CEO of YourDOST and a mental health professional working at the intersection of emotional well-being, higher education, and organisational care systems. Her work focuses on building accessible, preventive, and culturally embedded mental health ecosystems, with a particular emphasis on student well-being, workplace mental health, and institutional responsibility.

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Vaishnavi Reddy is a researcher working in the area of mental health and higher education. Her research interests include student well-being ecosystems, preventive care models, and the use of digital platforms to understand help-seeking behaviour, emotional well-being, and cultural maturity in institutional mental health systems.

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