

# Strained Equilibrium: A Secondary Data Analysis of Work-Life Balance Trends and Faculty Burnout in the Indian Higher Education Sector

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## Abstract

The Indian Higher Education sector is experiencing substantial transformation driven by the National Education Policy 2020 and intensified global ranking pressures. This paper examines Work-Life Balance among academic faculty through secondary analysis of All India Survey on Higher Education and University Grants Commission reports published between 2021 and 2025. The study reveals that although institutional infrastructure has expanded considerably, faculty members now encounter unprecedented role complexity encompassing teaching responsibilities, intensive research demands, and administrative audit requirements. Evidence suggests a meaningful correlation between elevated Pupil-Teacher Ratios and diminished faculty well-being. Additionally, gender-disaggregated data demonstrate that female faculty persistently shoulder a double burden, further intensified by the digitalization of education. The paper concludes by proposing policy recommendations centered on Wellness-First institutional frameworks.

**Keywords:** Work-Life Balance (WLB), Faculty Burnout, Academic Stress, Faculty Well-being, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

## 1. Background of Research

The Indian Higher Education system has undergone fundamental restructuring from a traditional lecture-centric model toward a multidisciplinary, research-intensive ecosystem. As of 2026, the sector ranks among the world's largest, with student enrollment exceeding 4.33 crore, representing an approximately 32 percent increase over the preceding decade (Ministry of Education, 2024). While this expansion advances India's objective of achieving a 50 percent Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035 under the National Education Policy 2020, it has imposed unprecedented cognitive and physical demands upon academic faculty.

The implementation of NEP 2020 has fundamentally redefined educator responsibilities. Faculty members now bear responsibility not only for classroom instruction but also for managing multidisciplinary curriculum frameworks, supervising skill-enhancement courses, and engaging in continuous professional

development (Singh & Kumar, 2024). This transition has introduced Work Intensification, wherein the admirable goal of developing well-rounded graduates translates into substantially increased workloads involving meticulously documented assessments and extensive mentoring responsibilities (Kumar & Dubey, 2024).

Furthermore, the Ranking and Accreditation culture propelled by the National Institutional Ranking Framework and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council has institutionalized a Publish or Perish mentality. Recent studies indicate that pressure to satisfy bibliometric targets regarding publications, citations, and patents has redirected institutional focus from holistic teaching toward administrative compliance (Bhatt, 2025). This metric-driven environment significantly elevates faculty burnout risk, as the hidden workload encompassing extensive documentation for audits consumes time that would otherwise be allocated to both teaching and personal life (Ali, 2022; Malik & Varma, 2025). The digitalization of academic workspaces has further complicated this equilibrium. Post-pandemic integration of Learning Management Systems and instant messaging platforms has spawned an Always-On culture. As documented by Deep and colleagues (2025), the erosion of professional and personal boundaries through continuous digital connectivity generates Digital Burnout, wherein expectations of immediate responsiveness prevent educators from achieving psychological detachment from work responsibilities. Within private institutions specifically, this stress intensifies through job insecurity and performance-linked evaluations, rendering the struggle for equilibrium more acute than in public sector institutions (Malik & Varma, 2025).

Consequently, the Work-Life Balance of Indian academics in 2026 stands at a critical juncture. The tension between institutional excellence and individual well-being suggests that prevailing academic models may prove unsustainable absent systemic policy interventions focused on Wellness-First frameworks (Geetanjali & Rawal, 2025).

## 2. Statement of Problem

The fundamental challenge confronting Indian Higher Education in 2026 concerns the widening disconnect between ambitious institutional aspirations manifested through global rankings and research output and the psycho-social well-being of faculty members. As institutions compete vigorously for favorable positions in the National Institutional Ranking Framework 2025, the resulting Performance Paradox has placed educators in a condition of persistent role strain.

Although the UGC Regulations 2025 were designed to introduce more comprehensive Faculty Appraisal 2.0 mechanisms, they have inadvertently generated new forms of Work Intensification (Singh & Kumar, 2024). The revised Career Advancement Scheme now mandates Notable Contributions across diverse domains including Indian Knowledge Systems, digital content creation, and community outreach initiatives. While these objectives carry social relevance, they have created Role Plexity wherein faculty members must simultaneously function as high-impact researchers, administrative auditors, and technology-proficient mentors (ZenithPHD, 2025).

This systemic pressure has entrenched a Publish or Perish culture that, despite stated policy shifts toward quality considerations, continues to disproportionately reward quantitative metrics. NIRF 2025 data indicates substantial increases in patent filings and publication outputs, yet this momentum is sustained by a faculty body reporting critical levels of Academic Burnout (KPMG, 2025). According to Deep and colleagues (2025), this burnout represents not merely an individual health concern but an institutional

liability; educators experiencing emotional exhaustion demonstrate measurable declines in teaching quality, which negatively correlates with student engagement and long-term academic outcomes. Moreover, the problem intensifies through the Always-On digital culture. The integration of Learning Management Systems and round-the-clock connectivity has effectively dissolved boundaries between classroom and home environments, producing a state of continuous digital fatigue (Deep et al., 2025). Most critically, the hidden workload comprising hundreds of hours devoted to NAAC documentation, NIRF data entry, and informal student counseling remains largely unacknowledged in official teaching-hour records. As Malik and Varma (2025) emphasize, this uncompensated labor constitutes a primary driver of work-life dissatisfaction, creating circumstances wherein the human capital of the Indian education system depletes more rapidly than it can be replenished.

### 3. Research Objectives

- To examine trends in faculty workload and teacher-pupil ratios utilizing AISHE data from 2021 to 2025
- To evaluate the effectiveness of UGC 2025 Draft Regulations in addressing faculty mental health and Work-Life Balance
- To identify the impact of digital transformation on professional-personal life boundaries
- To analyze gender-specific challenges in achieving Work-Life Balance within Indian Higher Education Institutions

### 4. Importance of Research

The significance of this investigation resides in its potential to catalyze structural reform within the Indian academic sector. This study extends beyond examination of stress to interrogate the sustainability of the Indian education system itself.

At the policy level, this research provides empirical foundations for the Ministry of Education and UGC regarding Right to Disconnect and Wellness-First policy frameworks. It contends that successful implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 requires psychologically resilient human capital in the form of faculty members (Singh & Kumar, 2024).

Regarding institutional excellence, understanding Work-Life Balance carries direct implications for brand value and faculty retention among University Vice-Chancellors and Directors. Elevated faculty turnover and burnout negatively impact NIRF rankings and NAAC accreditation scores in measurable ways (Bhatt, 2025).

Concerning educational quality, research demonstrates that balanced educators provide superior mentorship. By addressing Academic Burnout as highlighted in the Statement of Problem, this investigation indirectly advocates for improved learning environments serving over 4.3 crore students (Deep et al., 2025).

Regarding socio-economic equity, the focus on gender-specific challenges contributes to inclusive growth discourse. Failure to address Work-Life Balance risks loss of talented female researchers from the academic sector to more flexible corporate roles (Sharma & Gupta, 2024).

### 5. Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study employs a descriptive and analytical secondary data analysis approach, focusing on macro-level trends within the Indian Higher Education landscape spanning 2021 to

2026. The investigation primarily utilizes All India Survey on Higher Education reports and University Grants Commission annual publications to extract quantitative indicators such as Teacher-Pupil Ratios. This methodological framework enables systematic examination of patterns across institutions and time periods while maintaining focus on systemic rather than individual factors affecting faculty well-being.

## 6. Review of Literature

The scholarly discourse surrounding Work-Life Balance in Indian Higher Education has evolved substantially following the global pandemic and subsequent implementation of the National Education Policy 2020. Contemporary literature reflects a transition from conceptualizing Work-Life Balance as a matter of personal choice toward recognizing it as a systemic institutional challenge.

### 6.1. The Work Intensification Phenomenon in the NEP Era

The movement toward multidisciplinary and flexible education systems has introduced what Singh and Kumar (2024) characterize as Pedagogical Inflation. Faculty members now manage the Academic Bank of Credits, design Value-Added Courses, and integrate Indian Knowledge Systems into established curricula. This administrative-pedagogical overlap has substantially diminished time available for Deep Work and personal recovery. Furthermore, Bhatt (2025) observes that pressure to improve NIRF scores has institutionalized a Performance Paradox, wherein pursuit of global excellence frequently produces local faculty exhaustion.

### 6.2. Digital Spillover and the Always-On Culture

The digitalization of academic workspaces, initially welcomed as an instrument of flexibility, has emerged as a primary contributor to Work-Life Balance conflict. Deep and colleagues (2025) employed mixed-methods approaches to identify the Digital Spillover effect, finding that 72 percent of Indian faculty feel compelled to respond to student and administrative queries through WhatsApp and Learning Management Systems well beyond standard working hours. This absence of Psychological Detachment constitutes a leading cause of what researchers now term Digital Burnout (Deep et al., 2025). Their study emphasizes that boundary dissolution between home and office proves more pronounced in the Indian context due to elevated social valuation of teacher accessibility.

### 6.3. Institutional Disparities and Job Precarity

Work-Life Balance experiences vary significantly across institutional types. Malik and Varma (2025) conducted comparative analysis between public and private universities in South India. Their findings suggest that while public university faculty contend with resource depletion and elevated Teacher-Pupil Ratios, faculty in private Higher Education Institutions face heightened Performance-Linked Anxiety. The precarious nature of short-term contracts in the private sector compels numerous academics to overextend themselves, sacrificing personal time to secure job tenure—a phenomenon Malik and Varma characterize as survival-driven productivity.

### 6.4. The Gendered Double Burden and Career Stagnation

Gender remains a critical variable in Work-Life Balance research. Sharma and Gupta (2024) argue that the Indian academic ecosystem continues operating according to the Ideal Worker Norm, which assumes a professional free from domestic responsibilities. Their research highlights that female faculty persistently bear the Double Burden of domestic caregiving alongside professional output requirements. According to their analysis of AISHE 2023 data, this imbalance constitutes the primary explanation for the leaky pipeline, wherein women appear well-represented at the Assistant Professor level but remain

significantly under-represented in senior leadership positions including Deans and Vice-Chancellors (Sharma & Gupta, 2024).

### **6.5. Mental Health and the UGC Regulatory Shift**

Most recent literature has begun influencing policy development. Geetanjali and Rawal (2025) proposed a Wellness-First model for Indian Higher Education Institutions, arguing that institutional productivity functions as a lagging indicator of faculty health. This research trajectory is reflected in the UGC 2025 Draft Regulations, which for the first time incorporate Faculty Well-being as a success metric for institutional audits. Researchers now advocate for Flexible Tenure Clocks and mandatory Digital Detox policies to prevent complete depletion of India's intellectual capital (Geetanjali & Rawal, 2025).

## **7. Findings and Interpretation**

Analysis of macro-level data and recent institutional studies reveals substantial transition within the Indian academic landscape. The findings organize into three core themes: the growth-workload paradox, digital erosion of boundaries, and gendered dimensions of academic leadership.

### **7.1. The Growth-Workload Paradox and Structural Strain**

Findings from AISHE 2024-25 and UDISE+ reports indicate steady increase in absolute teacher numbers, reaching approximately 1.01 crore across the education sector. However, this growth has distributed unevenly. While Pupil-Teacher Ratios demonstrate improvement in school education, the Higher Education sector continues confronting a massification challenge. Interpretation of this data suggests that although enrollment has reached record levels surpassing 4.33 crore, permanent full-time faculty recruitment has failed to maintain pace with the multidisciplinary demands of NEP 2020. Consequently, faculty members experience Work Intensification, managing larger, more diverse cohorts with diminished institutional resources. This structural strain constitutes a primary driver of moderate to elevated stress levels reported by substantial portions of the academic workforce (Ministry of Education, 2024; JETIR, 2025).

### **7.2. The Performance-Digital Nexus and Academic Burnout**

A critical finding of this research concerns the emergence of a Performance-Digital Nexus. With implementation of UGC's Faculty Appraisal 2.0 in 2025, evaluation frameworks have shifted toward holistic makeovers encompassing student mentorship, community outreach, and digital content creation alongside traditional research. While designed as inclusive measures, these changes have increased the hidden workload. Simultaneously, the mandatory 40 percent online teaching component under NEP 2020 has institutionalized an Always-On culture. Recent empirical studies, including those by Malik and Varma (2025), find that over 70 percent of faculty in private Higher Education Institutions report poor work-life balance due to performance-linked evaluations and constant digital accessibility. The interpretation emerges clearly: digital tools intended to provide flexibility have instead functioned as conduits for Digital Spillover, producing chronic emotional exhaustion and diminished instructional quality (Deep et al., 2025; Malik & Varma, 2025).

### **7.3. Gender Disparities and the Leaky Pipeline in Leadership**

Data from AISHE and recent gender-participation studies from 2026 highlight a narrowing yet persistent gender gap. While female representation among Assistant Professors has increased significantly, reaching approximately 44 percent at college level, a sharp decline appears in women occupying senior leadership roles such as Deans, Directors, and Vice-Chancellors, where representation remains relatively stagnant between 25 and 30 percent. The findings suggest that the Double Burden encompassing intersection of

domestic caregiving responsibilities and rigid academic promotion timelines continues functioning as a glass ceiling. Interpreting these trends through socio-economic lenses reveals that absent institutionalized Wellness-First policies or flexible career pathways, the Indian academic system risks substantial loss of female talent to more flexible corporate sectors (Sharma & Gupta, 2024; Zenodo, 2026).

## 8. Recommendations

To address the growing crisis of work-life imbalance, a multi-stakeholder approach encompassing policy shifts at national levels and cultural changes at institutional levels proves necessary.

Higher Education Institutions must progress beyond superficial perks toward structural change by establishing dedicated Mental Health and Well-being Centres. Following latest mandates, institutions should maintain Faculty Mentor ratios of 1:500 and provide round-the-clock helpline access, integrating mental health support into core administrative frameworks rather than treating it as optional extracurricular activity (UGC, 2026; SCC Online, 2026).

To combat Digital Fatigue, Higher Education Institutions should adopt formal policies discouraging instant messaging and email use for non-urgent official purposes outside designated working hours. Drawing from global trends emerging in 2026, meeting-free periods and workload audits prove essential for reclaiming personal time from hybrid work spillover effects (Deep et al., 2025; Curphey, 2026).

Under the UGC Promotion of Equity Regulations 2026, every institution must establish Equal Opportunity Centres and Equity Committees. These mechanisms ensure safe and inclusive work environments, directly addressing psycho-social stressors related to discrimination and bias that frequently compound professional burnout (Vajiram & Ravi, 2026; JRFAdda, 2026).

Policy frameworks must evolve to incorporate Wellness-First models offering flexible scheduling and remote work options, particularly for female faculty managing the Double Burden. Such provisions include pausing promotion or tenure clocks during periods of significant caregiving responsibilities to prevent career stagnation (Sharma & Gupta, 2024; Singh & Samantaray, 2025).

## 9. Conclusion

The research conducted across the 2021 to 2026 period underscores that the Indian Higher Education sector has reached a critical tipping point. While expansion of student enrollment beyond 4.3 crore represents a monumental achievement for national development, this growth has imposed substantial costs upon the human capital of the system—the faculty. The findings highlight that Academic Burnout no longer constitutes an individual issue but rather a systemic byproduct of the Performance-Digital Nexus. The movement toward Wellness-First academic culture, as signaled by UGC 2026 regulations, represents a necessary step forward. However, successful integration of Work-Life Balance will depend on shifting away from quantitative Publish or Perish metrics toward holistic appraisal of educator roles. Ultimately, long-term sustainability and global competitiveness of Indian Higher Education Institutions depend on a straightforward premise: balanced, healthy, and psychologically secure faculty provide the only sustainable foundation for world-class education systems.

## 10. Scope of Future Research

Future investigations should examine whether integration of Generative AI and automated administrative tools such as the MANAS-SETU digital portal effectively reduces Hidden Workload or merely elevates expectations for even higher quantitative output.

Critical need exists for research tracking physiological markers of stress, including cortisol levels and cardiovascular health, among Indian academics over the coming decade to correlate policy changes with measurable physical well-being outcomes.

Research should explore whether Work-Life Balance challenges differ significantly between faculty in urban Edu-Hubs versus those in rural colleges, particularly focusing on disparities in digital infrastructure and resource availability.

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