

SOCIAL COMPETENCE AS A FOUNDATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A THEORETICAL REVIEW AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Psychological well-being (PWB) among university students has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary Indian higher education, with declining mental health indicators, increasing academic pressure, and post-pandemic social disruption placing new demands on student support systems. This paper presents a theoretical review of the relationship between social competence (SC) and psychological well-being, drawing on Ryff's (1989) eudaimonic model of PWB and multidimensional frameworks of social competence developed in the educational psychology literature. Through an integrative review of theoretical perspectives — including Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Social Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997), and Social Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993) — this paper argues that social competence constitutes a foundational psychological resource that supports student flourishing across all six dimensions of Ryff's model: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. The paper further develops a conceptual framework linking SC to PWB through three pathways: the Social Support Pathway, the Social Self-Efficacy Pathway, and the Social Integration Pathway. On the basis of this framework, concrete educational implications are proposed for university curriculum design, student counselling services, and institutional policy in the Indian higher education context. The paper contributes to theory by offering a pathway-specific model of the SC-PWB relationship that is sensitive to the collectivistic cultural context of Indian universities, and to practice by translating this model into actionable, evidence-informed recommendations.

KEYWORDS: Social Competence, Psychological Well-Being, Ryff's Model, Eudaimonic Well-Being, University Students, Higher Education, India, Educational Implications, Conceptual Framework, Student Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

The psychological well-being of university students has become a defining concern for higher education systems worldwide. In India, where over 43 million students are currently enrolled in higher education institutions (AISHE, 2023), the scale of the challenge is particularly significant. Studies from Indian universities consistently report elevated levels of academic stress, social anxiety, and identity-related difficulties among undergraduate students, particularly in the critical first and third years of study (Grover et al., 2020; Sidana et al., 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these vulnerabilities dramatically, disrupting the social fabric of university life — peer interaction, group learning, informal mentoring, extracurricular belonging — at precisely the developmental stage when social competence is most actively constructed and consolidated (Son et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020).

Despite growing institutional attention to student mental health, most university-based interventions focus narrowly on therapeutic services for students already in distress, rather than on building the upstream psychological resources that prevent distress from developing. This paper argues that social competence (SC) — the capacity to navigate interpersonal, group, and task-oriented social situations effectively — constitutes one such foundational upstream resource. Students who possess strong social skills are better equipped to form supportive peer relationships, integrate into academic communities, manage environmental demands through social coordination, and maintain a positive self-concept — all of which are directly relevant to psychological flourishing as conceptualised by Ryff (1989).

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces and critically reviews the two central constructs: social competence and Ryff's eudaimonic model of PWB. Section 3 develops a three-pathway conceptual framework linking SC to each dimension of PWB, drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), Social Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997), and Social Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993). Section 4 contextualises this framework within the specific cultural and institutional dynamics of Indian universities. Section 5 translates the framework into concrete educational implications organised across three levels: curriculum, counselling, and institutional policy. Section 6 identifies future directions for research. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the core argument.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE TWO CORE CONSTRUCTS

SOCIAL COMPETENCE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCE

Social competence is not a single trait but a multidimensional capacity comprising cognitive, affective, and behavioural components that enable effective social functioning across different types of situations (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). In the university context, three dimensions of social competence are particularly relevant. Group Competence refers to the ability to function effectively in collaborative, team-based, and collective academic settings — including coordinating with peers, managing group dynamics, contributing to shared goals, and navigating interpersonal disagreements productively. Task Competence refers to the ability to manage academic responsibilities with appropriate interpersonal coordination — including seeking help effectively, using social networks for academic problem-solving, and maintaining productive working relationships with instructors and peers. Social Self-Concept refers to an individual's positive self-evaluation of their own social abilities — the degree to which they perceive themselves as capable, likeable, and effective in social contexts.

These three dimensions are not merely additive; they interact. A student with high Group Competence but low Social Self-concept may avoid collaborative settings despite possessing the skills to succeed in them. Conversely, a student with high Social Self-concept but low Task Competence may overestimate their social abilities in academic contexts, leading to interpersonal friction rather than cooperation. This multidimensional understanding implies that social competence development in university settings requires targeted, dimension-specific approaches rather than a single generic "social skills training" programme.

Social competence is distinct from introversion/extraversion or general personality. It is a learnable, developable set of skills — a critical point for educational practice (Durlak et al., 2011). Students who arrive at university with lower social competence are not permanently disadvantaged; the university environment itself can either provide or withhold the conditions and supports for SC development. This positions universities as active determinants of student social competence, rather than merely passive contexts in which competence unfolds.

RYFF'S EUDAIMONIC MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Carol Ryff's (1989) model represents the most widely adopted framework for conceptualising psychological well-being in positive psychology and educational settings. Unlike hedonic well-being models that equate flourishing with positive affect and the absence of negative affect (Diener, 1984), Ryff's eudaimonic framework defines well-being in terms of optimal psychological functioning — realising one's potential, forming meaningful relationships, exercising purposive self-direction, and accepting oneself with honest self-awareness. The model comprises six theoretically grounded and empirically distinct dimensions.

Autonomy refers to the capacity for self-direction, independence from social pressure, and the ability to evaluate oneself using personally meaningful standards rather than externally imposed ones. In the university context, autonomy is reflected in students' ability to pursue academic goals that resonate with their own values rather than merely complying with parental or social expectations. Environmental Mastery refers to the capacity to manage and shape one's environment to meet personal needs and goals — selecting environments and opportunities that support one's growth. At university,

this translates to effectively navigating academic systems, accessing resources, and managing the complex social-institutional environment of campus life.

Personal Growth refers to a continuous sense of self-development — openness to new experiences, recognition of one's own progress over time, and a commitment to becoming more capable and effective. In educational contexts, Personal Growth is aligned with what Dweck (2006) terms the growth mindset: a belief that abilities can be expanded through effort, strategy, and help from others. Positive Relations with Others refers to the capacity for warm, trusting, satisfying interpersonal relationships characterised by empathy, reciprocity, and mutual care. This dimension is perhaps the most directly tied to social competence: the ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships depends on the interpersonal skills that SC encompasses.

Purpose in Life refers to a sense of direction and meaning — the feeling that life (and in the university context, one's academic trajectory) has purpose, that goals are worth pursuing, and that one's experiences contribute to a meaningful project. Self-Acceptance — the final dimension — refers to a positive, honest relationship with oneself: acknowledging personal limitations and past difficulties while maintaining an overall attitude of self-compassion and self-regard. Ryff and Keyes (1995) have demonstrated the cross-cultural validity of this six-factor structure, including in collectivistic cultural contexts, supporting its applicability in the Indian higher education setting.

A THREE-PATHWAY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING SC TO PWB

This paper proposes that social competence supports psychological well-being through three distinct theoretical pathways, each grounded in established psychological theory: (1) the Social Support Pathway, (2) the Social Self-Efficacy Pathway, and (3) the Social Integration Pathway. These pathways are not mutually exclusive — they operate simultaneously and interact — but distinguishing them analytically enables more precise educational intervention design.

PATHWAY ONE: SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) holds that access to interpersonal resources — informational support, emotional support, and instrumental support from one's social network — buffers individuals against the adverse psychological effects of stressors. At university, students face a range of significant stressors: academic performance pressure, transition adjustment, career uncertainty, relationship challenges, and financial strain. Students with higher social competence are better positioned to mobilise social support when confronted with these stressors, because they possess the skills required to seek help effectively, disclose difficulties appropriately, reciprocate support, and maintain the trusting relationships from which support can be drawn.

This pathway connects SC primarily to Environmental Mastery and Autonomy in Ryff's model. Environmental Mastery is enhanced when a student can draw on a network of peers, mentors, and instructors to navigate academic and institutional demands — socially competent students manage their environment partly by managing their relationships with the people in it. Autonomy is enhanced when social support creates a psychological safety net that enables independent decision-making: knowing that social resources are available if things go wrong makes it safer to exercise independent judgement rather than conforming to external pressure.

In the Indian university context, the social support pathway carries particular cultural weight. Collectivistic norms in India emphasise interdependence, family support, and communal problem-solving (Triandis, 1995). However, the transition to university — particularly for students migrating from rural areas to urban institutions — often involves a disruption of established social networks, placing students temporarily in a social support vacuum. Social competence determines how quickly and effectively students can rebuild functional support networks in the new institutional environment, making it a critical transition resource.

PATHWAY TWO: SOCIAL SELF-EFFICACY

Albert Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory proposes that self-efficacy — the belief in one's own capacity to perform successfully in a specific domain — is a powerful determinant of motivation, persistence, emotional regulation, and ultimately performance. Social self-efficacy specifically refers to the belief that one is capable of managing social situations effectively. Students who perceive themselves as socially competent (i.e., who have a strong Social Self-concept) carry this positive self-evaluation into broader self-appraisals, resulting in higher Self-Acceptance and a more stable sense of identity.

This pathway connects SC — specifically the Social Self-concept dimension — to Self-Acceptance and Personal Growth in Ryff's model. When students believe they are effective in social contexts, this belief generalises to an overall positive self-regard, directly feeding Self-Acceptance. Moreover, social self-efficacy motivates students to seek out novel interpersonal challenges — joining new groups, forming new friendships, taking on leadership roles in collaborative settings — which accelerate Personal Growth. The reverse is equally true: students who perceive themselves as socially incompetent tend to avoid social situations, creating an experiential deficit that prevents the development of both social skills and a positive social self-concept (the well-known avoidance cycle; Bandura, 1997).

The social self-efficacy pathway also has implications for Purpose in Life. Students with high social self-efficacy are more likely to engage with diverse social communities at university, including clubs, volunteer organisations, peer mentoring programmes, and student governance — activities that are important sources of meaning and purposive direction. Through these engagements, students develop a clearer sense of who they are and what they care about, enriching their sense of

purpose. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory supports this connection: peak experiences of absorbed, purposive engagement are more likely when individuals feel competent in the social contexts in which they participate.

PATHWAY THREE: SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Vincent Tinto's (1993) Social Integration Theory of student retention proposes that students who are socially integrated into the academic community — who feel a sense of belonging, have peer connections, and participate in institutional life — are more committed to their academic goals and less likely to disengage or withdraw. While Tinto's original model focused on dropout, the well-being implications of social integration are equally important: students who feel they belong at their institution experience higher positive affect, lower anxiety, and greater sense of purpose (Osterman, 2000; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Social integration requires social competence. Students who lack the interpersonal skills to initiate friendships, navigate group dynamics, and engage constructively with peers and faculty cannot fully participate in the social life of their institution, regardless of their academic ability. This creates a structural disadvantage: the students who most need social integration — those who are transitioning, isolated, or from less privileged social backgrounds — are often those with the least developed social competence, precisely because they have had fewer opportunities to develop and practice these skills.

The social integration pathway connects SC to Positive Relations with Others and Purpose in Life in Ryff's model. Social integration by definition involves the formation of meaningful relationships (Positive Relations), while the sense of institutional belonging that flows from integration supports a student's sense of academic purpose (Purpose in Life). Importantly, in the Indian context, first-generation university students — who represent a large and growing proportion of the student population — often face the greatest social integration challenges, as they lack the informal cultural capital (knowledge of institutional norms, academic communication conventions, networking strategies) that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have acquired through family socialisation (Yosso, 2005; Kiran & Reddy, 2018).

THE INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT: CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Any framework linking social competence to psychological well-being in Indian universities must be sensitive to the distinctive cultural and institutional context in which Indian students develop. Several features of this context are particularly relevant.

Collectivism and Interdependence. Indian cultural values emphasise group harmony, family obligation, hierarchical respect, and relational interdependence (Triandis, 1995; Kaur & Sharma, 2021). In this context, social competence is not simply a matter of individual skill but is embedded in relational and contextual norms: knowing how to show respect to senior figures, how to navigate family expectations while developing personal autonomy, and how to balance individual achievement goals with collective obligations. The Autonomy dimension of Ryff's model — which emphasises independence from social pressure — may have a qualitatively different meaning in a collectivistic context than in individualistic Western cultures. For Indian students, a healthy autonomy may involve selective independence rather than global independence: choosing which social pressures to resist while maintaining valued relational commitments. Educational frameworks that import Western autonomous-individual models of student development wholesale may therefore miss important dimensions of Indian student experience.

Rural-Urban Transition. A significant proportion of Indian university students are first-time migrants from rural to urban settings, attending university in cities far from their families and home communities. This transition imposes acute social competence demands: navigating an unfamiliar urban social environment, forming new peer networks, adapting to different linguistic and cultural registers, and managing the emotional dimensions of separation from family. Students who enter this transition with lower social competence are at markedly higher risk of social isolation, which — through the pathways outlined above — translates directly into lower PWB (Kaur & Sharma, 2021). This suggests that rural students at Indian universities may benefit disproportionately from early social competence support.

Academic Pressure and Competition. Indian higher education is characterised by intense academic competition, shaped by the high-stakes entrance examination culture and limited availability of prestigious institutional places. This competitive environment can produce a campus culture in which social relationships are experienced as instrumental or threatening rather than supportive and reciprocal. In such contexts, the Social Support Pathway may be attenuated: even students with the interpersonal skills to seek help may be reluctant to do so if help-seeking is associated with weakness or competitive disadvantage. University interventions that aim to build social competence must therefore also work to reshape campus culture — fostering norms of cooperative peer support rather than zero-sum competition.

Gender Differences. Gender shapes both the development and expression of social competence in Indian university settings. Female students in Indian universities often navigate additional social constraints — including family monitoring of social activities, gender-based campus safety concerns, and societal expectations regarding gender-appropriate behaviour — that can restrict the social participation through which SC is developed and exercised. Understanding these gender-specific dynamics is essential for designing SC interventions that are equitable and contextually appropriate (Mehrotra, 2004).

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The three-pathway conceptual framework developed in this paper generates concrete educational implications across three levels: curriculum design, counselling services, and institutional policy. These are organised below.

CURRICULUM DESIGN: EMBEDDING SOCIAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

The most fundamental implication of the SC-PWB framework is that social competence development should be treated as a legitimate academic goal — not an extracurricular add-on — and embedded systematically within university curricula. Three specific curricular approaches are proposed.

First, first-year foundation courses should include a structured Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) component covering core social competence skills: effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, empathic listening, assertive help-seeking, constructive feedback, and social self-reflection. Such components need not be lengthy; Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis demonstrated that well-designed, brief SEL interventions (as few as 8–10 hours) produce significant improvements in social competence and downstream well-being outcomes. In the Indian context, culturally adapted SEL curricula that acknowledge collectivistic values and address rural-urban transition challenges would be most effective.

Second, collaborative and cooperative learning pedagogies should be expanded across disciplines. Cooperative learning structures — including structured group projects, jigsaw activities, peer teaching, and case-based team analysis — provide authentic in-context practice for social competence skills while simultaneously delivering academic content. Crucially, for cooperative learning to develop rather than merely require social competence, structures must include explicit attention to group process: role assignments, reflection prompts, and facilitated debriefs that help students develop metacognitive awareness of their social functioning. Simply placing students in groups and assigning a project does not, by itself, build social competence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Third, discipline-specific curricula should incorporate assignments that require students to engage with diverse peers, communities, and perspectives — through service-learning, community-engaged projects, or inter-programme collaborations. These experiences develop the cross-contextual social competence needed for Environmental Mastery and Personal Growth, and can simultaneously generate the sense of purpose and social meaning that supports Purpose in Life and Self-Acceptance in Ryff's model.

COUNSELLING SERVICES: SHIFTING FROM REMEDIAL TO DEVELOPMENTAL

University counselling services in India are predominantly structured as remedial services — reactive responses to students in acute distress. While therapeutic services for students in crisis are irreplaceable, the SC-PWB framework implies a significant expansion of the counselling mandate toward developmental and preventive functions.

Developmental counselling for social competence would involve proactive outreach to students at identified transition risk points — the start of the first semester, the commencement of group-project-heavy courses, and points of major academic assessment — to offer social self-reflection tools, peer connection resources, and brief SC skill-building workshops. Group counselling formats are particularly appropriate here, as they simultaneously build SC (through structured group interaction) and deliver skill content. Psychoeducational group programmes combining social skills training with well-being awareness — for example, adapted versions of the Penn Resiliency Program or the Oxford Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy curriculum, localised for Indian cultural contexts — have strong evidence bases for improving both SC and PWB dimensions (Seligman et al., 2009; Kuyken et al., 2013).

Counsellors should also be equipped to screen for social competence deficits during routine well-being assessments. A brief SC screening at the start of a student's academic career — identifying students with low Social Self-concept or limited Group Competence — could enable early referral to peer mentoring programmes or social skills support before a pattern of social isolation becomes entrenched. This kind of early identification is consistent with the universal-selective-indicated prevention model (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994) applied to student mental health.

Finally, counsellors working with students experiencing low Self-Acceptance or Purpose in Life — the PWB dimensions most strongly connected to the Social Self-Efficacy Pathway — can explicitly target social self-efficacy beliefs through cognitive-behavioural techniques: reviewing evidence of past social successes, challenging negative social self-evaluations, designing social approach experiments, and building a positive social self-narrative. These approaches address the SC-PWB connection at the individual clinical level, complementing the broader institutional-level interventions described elsewhere.

INSTITUTIONAL POLICY: CREATING CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

Individual-level interventions can only achieve limited impact if the institutional environment does not support social competence development. Several institutional policy changes are implied by the SC-PWB framework.

Peer Mentoring Programmes. Formal peer mentoring — in which senior students are trained and assigned to support first-year or transition students — creates a structured social integration mechanism for students who might not otherwise access peer support networks. For peer mentoring to develop SC rather than merely provide information, senior mentors should receive training in active listening, non-directive support, and the facilitation of mentee reflection. Programmes

that are voluntary rather than assigned show stronger outcomes, as they ensure genuine relational investment on the part of both mentor and mentee (Jacobi, 1991).

Social Space and Community Design. The physical and architectural design of university campuses sends powerful messages about whether social connection is valued. Campuses that provide abundant informal social spaces — common rooms, student lounges, collaborative study areas, outdoor gathering spaces — actively support the incidental social contact through which friendships and peer networks form. In contrast, campuses organised around lecture halls and individual study spaces implicitly prioritise solitary academic work over social integration. Institutional investment in social-physical infrastructure represents a structural intervention for student SC and PWB that complements all individual-level programming.

Recognition and Assessment of Social Competence. Universities that formally recognise social competence development — through co-curricular records, employability portfolios, community engagement credits, or social-emotional learning awards — signal to students that these capacities are valued, motivating investment in their development. There is a well-established tension here: formalised SC assessment risks instrumentalising what should be an intrinsic relational commitment. The most appropriate approach is to make SC recognition voluntary and portfolio-based, celebrating student growth rather than ranking competence against a normative standard.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This paper has developed a theoretical framework linking social competence to psychological well-being through three pathways. Several important empirical and theoretical questions remain open and constitute priorities for future research.

First, the differential subscale predictions generated by the framework — that SC will be most strongly associated with Positive Relations (Integration Pathway), Self-Acceptance (Self-Efficacy Pathway), and Environmental Mastery (Support Pathway), and less strongly with Autonomy — need systematic empirical testing. Regression and structural equation modelling studies using large, diverse Indian university samples would provide the first direct tests of these subscale-specific predictions.

Second, the three pathways themselves need to be modelled as mediators. Future studies should test whether (a) perceived social support, (b) social self-efficacy, and (c) sense of campus belonging mediate the SC-PWB relationship in the predicted pattern — with social support mediating the SC-EM and SC-Autonomy paths, social self-efficacy mediating the SC-SA and SC-PG paths, and social integration mediating the SC-PRwO and SC-PiL paths. This would provide the first rigorous pathway-specific mediation evidence for the framework.

Third, the cultural moderators proposed in Section 4 — collectivism, rural-urban background, gender — need to be tested as moderators of the SC-PWB relationship. Do rural students show stronger SC-PWB associations than urban students, as the transition-stress hypothesis implies? Does gender moderate the SC-Autonomy relationship differently in India compared to Western samples? These are answerable empirical questions with important policy implications.

Fourth, longitudinal designs are needed to test the developmental trajectory of social competence across the undergraduate degree. Does SC increase, decrease, or remain stable across years of study? Do critical SC development periods exist (e.g., the first semester, the transition into advanced study), and do students who experience SC growth during these periods show corresponding PWB gains? Answering these questions requires panel designs tracking students from university entry to graduation.

Finally, intervention research is needed to test whether SC-building curricula and programmes produce the predicted downstream gains in PWB. Randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs evaluating culturally adapted SEL programmes in Indian universities, with PWB as a primary outcome and SC as a mediator, would provide the strongest evidence for the practical implications advanced in this paper.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that social competence is not simply a social skill but a foundational psychological resource for student flourishing in Indian universities. Drawing on Ryff's (1989) eudaimonic model of psychological well-being and three established theoretical pathways — Social Support, Social Self-Efficacy, and Social Integration — the paper has developed a conceptual framework explaining how social competence supports each of the six dimensions of PWB: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance.

The framework is sensitive to the specific cultural and institutional dynamics of Indian higher education — including collectivistic values, rural-urban transition challenges, competitive academic cultures, and gender-specific constraints — and generates educational implications across three levels: embedding SEL in curricula, transforming counselling services from remedial to developmental, and redesigning institutional structures to actively support social connection. These implications are not merely theoretical; they are actionable within the current institutional capacities of Indian universities, requiring investment in people, programmes, and policies that many institutions are already in a position to make.

The fundamental message of this paper is simple but important: building students' capacity to connect effectively with one another is not a distraction from the academic mission of the university. It is, in fact, one of the most educationally

powerful investments a university can make — not only for student mental health and well-being, but for the quality of learning, the depth of community, and the long-term flourishing of the students entrusted to its care.

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