A Model of Academic Well-Being: An Integrative Review of Faculty and Staff Mental Health in Higher Education

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Abstrack

The well-being of faculty and staff in higher education has increasingly become a global concern, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, existing research remains fragmented and lacks a unified theoretical framework. This study aimed to synthesize empirical evidence on faculty and staff mental health and to develop an integrative Academic Well-Being model for higher-education settings. A Systematic Integrative Review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020. Seventeen peer-reviewed international studies published between 2017 and 2025 were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The findings reveal that academic well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing eight key dimensions: psychological, social, organizational, spiritual, physical, digital, financial, and cultural policy. Psychological well-being and empathetic leadership emerged as central determinants, while digital adaptation, spiritual meaning, and financial security are emerging factors in the post-pandemic period. The synthesis resulted in an Ecological Model of Academic Well-Being (EAWB) comprising four nested levels: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and cultural systemic that interact dynamically to shape mental health and professional flourishing in academia. The model highlights that sustainable well-being arises not from personal resilience but from compassionate leadership, organizational justice, and inclusive cultures. This review contributes a holistic framework for transforming universities into compassionate ecosystems.
Keywords: academic well-being model, mental health, university staff, higher education

Abstrak

Kesejahteraan pada fakultas dan staf di perguruan tinggi semakin menjadi perhatian global, terutama selama pandemi COVID-19. Namun, penelitian yang ada tetap terfragmentasi dan tidak memiliki kerangka teoritis yang terpadu. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mensintesis bukti empiris tentang kesehatan mental fakultas dan staf dan untuk mengembangkan model Kesejahteraan Akademik integratif untuk pengaturan pendidikan tinggi. Systematic Integrative Review (SLR) dilakukan sesuai dengan PRISMA 2020. Tujuh belas studi internasional peer-review yang diterbitkan antara 2017 dan 2025 dianalisis melalui sintesis tematik. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa kesejahteraan akademik adalah konstruksi multidimensi yang mencakup delapan dimensi utama: kebijakan psikologis, sosial, organisasi, spiritual, fisik, digital, keuangan, dan budaya. Kesejahteraan psikologis dan kepemimpinan empati muncul sebagai penentu sentral, sedangkan adaptasi digital, makna spiritual, dan keamanan finansial adalah faktor yang muncul di periode pascapandemi. Sintesis tersebut menghasilkan Model Ekologi Kesejahteraan Akademik (EAWB) yang terdiri dari empat tingkat bersarang: sistemik individu, interpersonal, organisasi, dan budaya yang berinteraksi secara dinamis untuk membentuk kesehatan mental dan perkembangan profesional di dunia akademis. Model ini menyoroti bahwa kesejahteraan berkelanjutan muncul bukan dari ketahanan pribadi tetapi dari kepemimpinan yang penuh kasih, keadilan organisasi, dan budaya inklusif. Tinjauan ini menyumbangkan kerangka kerja holistik untuk mengubah universitas menjadi ekosistem yang penuh kasih.
Kata kunci: *model kesejahteraan akademik, kesehatan mental, staf universitas, pendidikan tinggi*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of mental health and well-being among academics in higher education has gained widespread attention, both in research and in institutional policy. Globally, lecturers and educational staff face increased workloads, publication pressures, strict performance demands, and career uncertainties that challenge their psychological balance and professional satisfaction (Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Yeo, 2024). While discourse on student well-being has grown rapidly, the well-being of educators and administrative staff, who are the backbone of the higher education system, has received relatively little attention. The academic world, which is characterized by high cognitive demands, emotional labor, and continuous assessment, makes lecturers and staff vulnerable to stress, burnout, and reduced work engagement (Zhou & Wang, 2025). This condition not only affects individuals but also the effectiveness of institutions, the quality of teaching, and the psychosocial climate of campuses (Deep et al., 2025; Sabagh et al., 2018). Therefore, a more comprehensive conceptualization of academic well-being as a construct that represents the holistic welfare of academic staff in higher education is needed.

The need to focus on academic well-being has been heightened in the post-pandemic era, as the COVID-19 crisis changed the nature of academic work. Digital transformation advanced rapidly, prompting faculty and staff to adapt, sometimes with minimal training or institutional support, to new work protocols that included hybrid work models, online instructional delivery methods, and virtual administrative workflows. This change has led to novel types of psychological distress, such as ‘digital fatigue’, ‘technostress’, and blurring of boundaries between work and life (Lu et al., 2023). To complicate matters further, workload challenges have been exacerbated by rising expectations for publishing and other performance-based measures, leading to disillusionment and emotional exhaustion among many in the academic field. Such converging challenges highlight the need for renewed conceptualizations of academic well-being that attend not just to conventional stressors, but the emergent complexities of digitalized, globalized, and increasingly precarious academic labour. Despite increasing awareness of these problems, the ground remains fractured. Most of the research has narrowly examined individual- level factors like stress management, coping strategies, and personal resilience while ignoring the wider social, organizational, and cultural aspects that influence mental health in the context of higher education. There is an important void within the literature: none have integrated these multiple sources of influence into a singular, ideational model that embraces the systemic and ecological nature of academic well-being.

The term academic well-being has emerged as a multidisciplinary concept that encompasses physical, emotional, social, and professional dimensions in an academic context. However, the existing literature remains fragmented and rooted in various theoretical approaches, ranging from positive psychology, occupational health, guidance and counseling, to organizational studies. For example, positive psychology emphasizes aspects of happiness, meaning, and engagement (Seligman, 2006), while work stress theory highlights role strain and workload (Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021). In guidance and educational psychology, well-being is often associated with resilience, self-care, and coping strategies that support professional effectiveness (Popova et al., 2023). Although these various perspectives make important contributions, to date, there has been no integrated conceptual framework that integrates the personal, organizational, and socio-cultural factors that influence the well-being of academics. The ambiguity of this concept

has implications for the limitations of evidence-based measurement tools and interventions (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Recent studies show that the well-being of academic staff cannot be understood solely in terms of individual psychological factors, but is also influenced by the institutional context and work environment. Universities are not just workplaces but also complex social systems in which interpersonal relationships, leadership styles, academic governance, and value alignment influence an individual's sense of satisfaction and meaning (Way et al., 2019). Organizational support, collegial relationships, autonomy, and recognition of contributions are important protective factors, while job insecurity, intensified workload, and excessive bureaucracy act as stressors (Chen et al., 2020). In addition, the digitization of higher education and online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new psychosocial risks, such as technostress, social isolation, and the blurring of boundaries between personal life and work (Lu et al., 2023). These changes require a re-evaluation of the concept of academic well-being in order to capture the interaction between individual agency and institutional context.

The field of guidance and counseling in higher education also has a strategic role in this discourse. The well-being of lecturers and staff has direct implications for the quality of counseling services, professional development, and the institutional well-being climate. Counselors and organizational psychologists understand that well-being is an individual experience that is shaped by social and cultural systems (Das et al., 2020; Wang, 2024). However, in practice, interventions in higher education are often limited to stress management or mindfulness training, without addressing structural determinants such as organizational justice, workload, or professional identity (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021). This gap indicates a dissonance between micro (individual) interventions and macro (organizational) factors that simultaneously shape academic well-being. Thus, a comprehensive academic well-being model should include cross-level interactions between psychological resources (e.g., resilience, coping, and life meaning) and contextual factors (e.g., leadership support, collegial trust, and organizational justice).

The emergence of the whole university approach to well-being emphasizes that the responsibility for creating a healthy work environment is collective. This approach aligns with contemporary psychological theory, which views well-being as a relational and systemic phenomenon rather than merely an individual one (Das et al., 2020). This means that the well-being of lecturers and staff directly contributes to student success, research productivity, and institutional reputation. However, empirical studies that integrate these cross-level dimensions are still limited. Most studies focus on specific stressors or coping mechanisms, rather than on the interrelationship between structural and interpersonal factors that support academic flourishing.

Given this gap, an integrative review is a relevant and necessary approach. This method allows researchers to synthesize various empirical and theoretical sources, quantitative, qualitative, and conceptual, to produce new frameworks and theoretical insights (Kivunja, 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for emerging constructs such as academic well-being, which are multidisciplinary and cross-traditional. By mapping how faculty and staff well-being has been conceptualized, measured, and developed in the literature, this study seeks to promote theoretical integration toward a comprehensive model.

Hence, this review aims to critically evaluate and synthesize the research on mental health and academic well-being in higher education to the extent that it enables the development of a conceptual model of academic well-being that is theoretically strong

and practically useful for informing policy in contemporary higher education institutions. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the main theoretical and empirical approaches used in academic well-being studies; (2) synthesize the individual, organizational, and environmental factors that influence this well-being; and (3) propose an integrative conceptual model that can serve as a basis for counseling practices, policy development, and institutional well-being strategies in higher education. Through this integration, it is anticipated that the study will contribute to the theoretical knowledge by presenting an ecological model that connects psychological, social, organizational, and cultural levels of analysis, as well as offering practical implications for the sustainable enhancement of academic community well-being via empirically supported interventions and caring institutional management.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Integrative Review design to synthesize diverse empirical and conceptual evidence on the well-being of faculty and staff in higher education. The integrative review approach was selected because it allows the inclusion of studies with heterogeneous methodologies, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of complex psychosocial phenomena (Stern et al., 2020). The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for transparent reporting and included four main stages: (1) problem identification, (2) literature search, (3) data evaluation, and (4) data analysis and synthesis. This process ensured systematic rigor while accommodating theoretical and contextual diversity across studies.

The review was guided by the following objectives, consistent with the research purpose stated in the introduction:

1. To identify the key dimensions and determinants of academic well-being among faculty and staff in higher education.
2. To examine methodological patterns and contextual trends in the study of academic well-being; and
3. To synthesize the findings into a conceptual ecological model that integrates psychological, social, organizational, and cultural perspectives on faculty and staff mental health.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted between August and October 2025 across multiple academic databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Emerald. To capture relevant literature, the search employed Boolean combinations of the following keywords and synonyms:

("academic well-being" OR "faculty well-being" OR "staff well-being" OR "mental health in higher education") AND ("university" OR "college" OR "higher education") AND ("faculty" OR "lecturer" OR "academic staff" OR "educator") AND ("stress" OR "psychological well-being" OR "work engagement" OR "organizational culture" OR "resilience"). The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2017 and 2025, written in English, and available in full-text format. Reference lists of key papers and relevant reviews were also hand-searched to identify additional studies not captured by database queries.

To ensure relevance and quality, studies were screened according to explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1).

Table 1.
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Study Selection

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles (empirical or theoretical)	Books, dissertations, editorials, conference abstracts
Population	Faculty members, lecturers, counselors, academic staff, or higher-education employees	Undergraduate students only; non-academic staff
Focus	Studies examining psychological, social, organizational, or cultural determinants of well-being in academia	Studies unrelated to well-being or focusing solely on performance/productivity
Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods	Non-empirical opinion papers without evidence base
Time Frame	2017–2025	Before 2017
Language	English	Non-English articles

Articles that included both student and staff samples were retained only if staff data were analyzed separately or explicitly discussed.

The initial database search yielded 916 records. After removing duplicates (n = 723), 193 unique articles were screened based on title and abstract. Of these, 64 full-text articles were reviewed for eligibility. Following exclusion of studies that did not meet inclusion criteria (e.g., focus on students only, absence of well-being constructs, or incomplete data), a final sample of 17 studies was included in the analysis.

The selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram

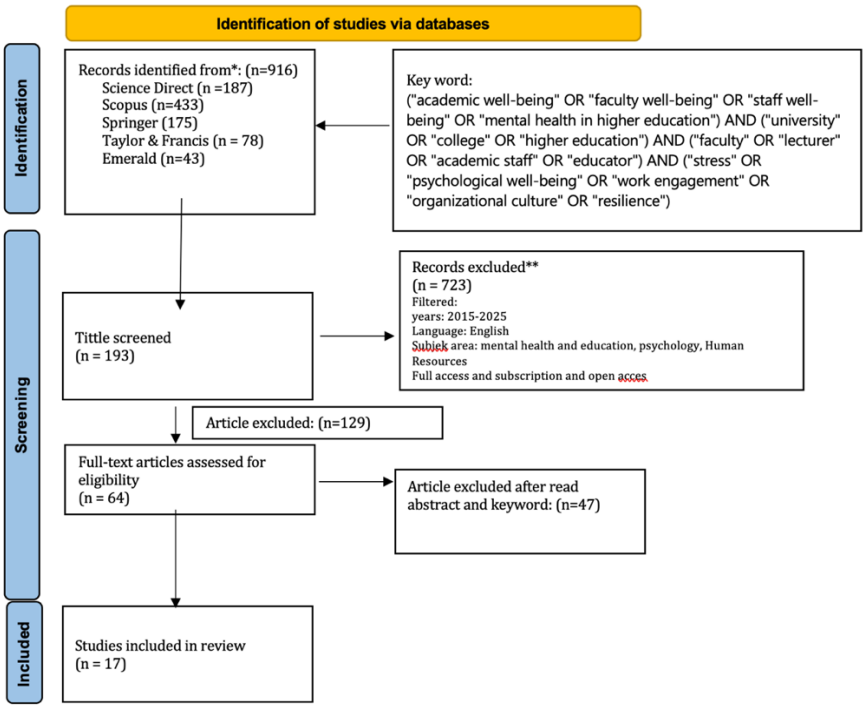

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart for Study Selection

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Background this systematic integrative review was used to synthesize 17 peer-reviewed studies published from 2017 to 2025, which included different country contexts, methodologies, and theoretical orientations. Together, studies revealed the mental health and well-being of faculty and staff at the organizational level (psychological, social, organizational, spiritual, physical, digital, financial, and cultural–policy). A full description of the included studies can be found in the Table, which summarises the authorship, country of origin, research design, sample size, key findings, and the primary well-being dimensions considered by each study. This tabular synthesis acts as the basis for discussing thematic trends in methodological approaches and conceptual saliences within the domain of academic well-being.

Table 1.
Summary of Included Studies on Academic Well-Being in Higher Education

No.	Authors (Year)	Country	Methodology	Participants (n)	Main Findings	Primary Well-Being Dimensions
1.	(Fahdi et al., 2025)	Oman	Qualitative	14	Faculty and counselors face stress from stigma, workload, and lack of institutional support.	Psychological, Organizational, Social
2.	(Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017)	Pakistan	Quantitative	245	Corporate social responsibility predicts job satisfaction and organizational commitment.	Organizational, Ethical, Spiritual
3.	(Khan et al., 2024)	China	Quantitative	443	Psychological capital and social support improve mental health and academic performance.	Psychological, Social
4.	(Yslado-Méndez et al., 2025)	Peru	Qualitative	34	Digital interventions (DMHI) are effective but limited by stigma and connectivity issues.	Digital, Social, Organizational

5.	(Robinson & Gilmore, 2021)	USA	Quantitative	398	Leisure physical activity enhances physical and mental health; work activity not significant.	Physical, Psychological
6.	(Shaheen et al., 2021)	Pakistan	Quantitative	287	Emotional support increases PWB; social undermining decreases it; mediation significant.	Social, Psychological, Organizational
7.	(Borges et al., 2023)	Brazil	Quantitative	285	Working conditions significantly affect mental health; bureaucracy and aggression = key risks.	Organizational, Psychological, Social
8.	(Bożek et al., 2020)	Poland	Quantitative	595	Spirituality positively affects PWB directly and indirectly through health behaviors.	Spiritual, Psychological, Physical
9.	(Leung & Pong, 2021)	Hong Kong	Quantitative	500	Spirituality negatively correlates with depression, anxiety, and stress.	Spiritual, Psychological
10.	(Vesely et al., 2024)	USA	Mixed Methods	123	Financial and psychological well-being show curvilinear relation; social support buffers stress.	Financial, Psychological, Social

11.	(Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021)	Multi-country	Systematic Review	22 studies	Management-led interventions (leadership, workload audits, EAPs) reduce academic stress.	Organizational, Policy, Psychological
12.	(Ramluggun et al., 2022)	UK	Qualitative	71	Faculty experience emotional strain and role conflict; call for training and empathetic leadership.	Organizational, Social, Psychological
13.	(Brewster et al., 2022)	UK	Qualitative	360	Staff–student well-being is interdependent; competitive culture harms empathy and balance.	Social, Organizational, Cultural
14.	(Mopkins et al., 2024)	USA	Quantitative	202	Perceived mental health and peer support predict PWB; physical demand reduces it.	Psychological, Social, Physical
15.	(Soneson et al., 2024)	USA	Mixed Methods	108	Web-based training improves staff self-efficacy in supporting mental health literacy.	Digital, Psychological, Social
16.	(Smith et al., 2022)	Canada	Qualitative	9	Stigma and corporatization reduce faculty well-being; empathetic leadership enhances resilience.	Cultural, Psychological, Organizational

17.	(Cage et al., 2021)	UK	Qualitative	107	Transitions affect mental health; need for whole-university approach and sense of belonging.	Psychological, Social, Policy, Transitional

The findings across the seventeen studies reveal that academic well-being is not a unidimensional construct but rather an interconnected web of psychological, social, organizational, spiritual, physical, digital, financial, and cultural policy dimensions. Psychological well-being emerged as the foundational core, encompassing emotional regulation, resilience, self-efficacy, and purpose (Khan et al., 2024; Mopkins et al., 2024). However, psychological health was consistently mediated by social support and organizational factors particularly empathetic leadership, workload distribution, and institutional justice. Studies from Pakistan (Shaheen et al., 2021), China (Khan et al., 2024), Brazil (Borges et al., 2023), and the United Kingdom (Ramluggun et al., 2022; Brewster et al., 2022) demonstrated that perceived social support and transparent, participatory leadership significantly buffered stress and enhanced well-being, while bureaucratic rigidity, performance surveillance, and competitive cultures exacerbated burnout and emotional exhaustion. The systematic review by Ohadomere and Ogamba (2021) further confirmed that management-led interventions, such as workload audits, employee assistance programs, and leadership training, effectively reduced workplace stress and improved mental health outcomes.

Emerging dimensions of spiritual, digital, and financial well-being represent new frontiers in academic well-being research, particularly in the post-pandemic context. Spiritual well-being, defined as a sense of meaning and transcendence, directly enhances psychological health by promoting healthy behaviors and reducing distress (Bożek et al., 2020; Leung & Pong, 2021). Digital well-being gained prominence as universities adopted hybrid systems; while digital interventions showed promise in enhancing accessibility and self-efficacy (Soneson et al., 2024; Yslado-Méndez et al., 2025), they were also limited by technostress and connectivity barriers—especially in resource-constrained settings. Financial well-being exhibited a curvilinear relationship with psychological health: moderate security buffered stress, while precarity amplified anxiety (Vesely et al., 2024). Cross-cultural findings revealed important contextual differences: studies from high-income countries emphasized institutional culture and whole-university approaches (Brewster et al., 2022; Cage et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022), while research from developing countries highlighted structural challenges such as inadequate support, stigma, and infrastructural barriers (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017; Borges et al., 2023; Fahdi et al., 2025; Yslado-Méndez et al., 2025). These findings underscore the need for context-sensitive, multidimensional well-being models that integrate empathetic leadership, work-life balance policies, and whole-institution approaches to sustain mental health and academic productivity across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts.

The visual trend line (Figure 2) demonstrates this expansion, with 2021–2024 representing the most prolific period, reflecting growing international recognition of faculty and staff well-being as a strategic imperative in higher education governance.

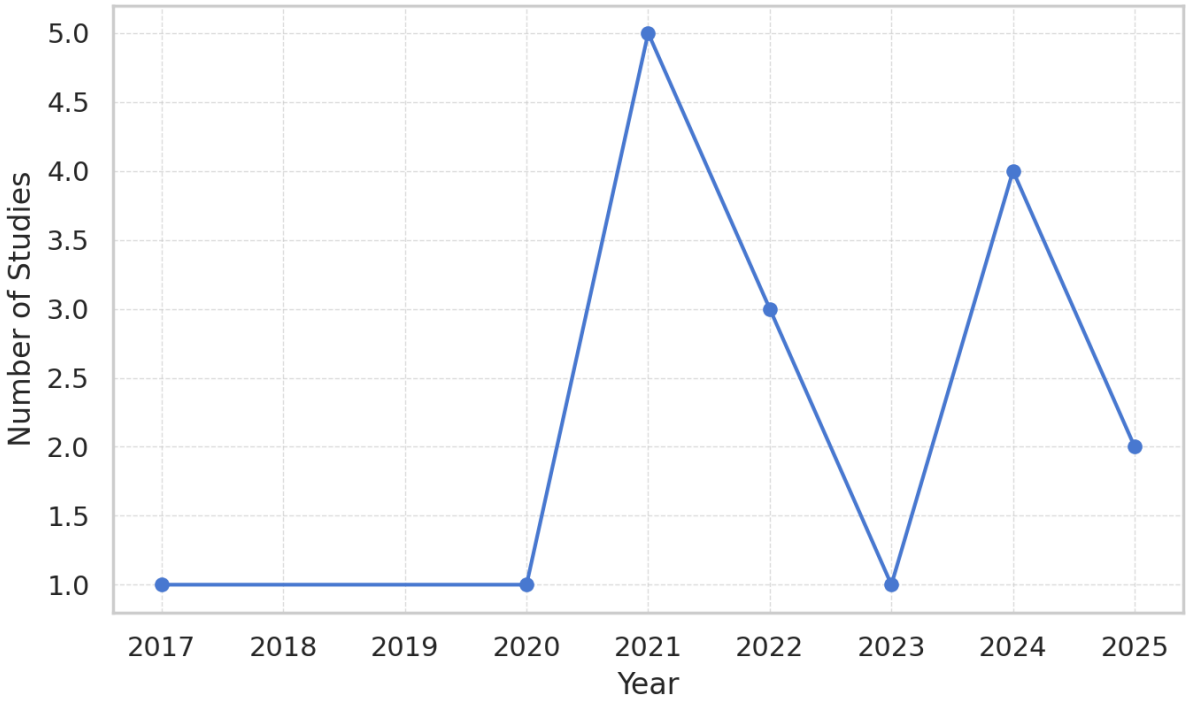

Figure 2. Publication Trend

A steady upward trajectory in research on academic well-being was observed across the reviewed period (2017–2025). The earliest study, published in 2017, focused primarily on corporate social responsibility and organizational commitment (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017), reflecting an initial managerial orientation toward workplace satisfaction rather than holistic well-being. However, between 2020 and 2025, the frequency of publications increased sharply, coinciding with the global mental health crisis intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth signals a paradigm shift in higher education from a productivity-driven discourse to one that emphasizes psychological safety, mental health literacy, and institutional compassion. Most publications after 2020 integrated multidimensional perspectives that merged psychological, organizational, and social determinants, suggesting a maturation of the field toward ecological and systemic frameworks (Brewster et al., 2022; Cage et al., 2021).

The methodological mapping (Figure 3) indicates that the field remains largely exploratory, with qualitative research dominating 53% of the reviewed studies. These investigations such as (Brewster et al., 2022; Ramluggun et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022) rely on focus groups and interviews to uncover emotional experiences, identity struggles, and perceptions of institutional support among academic staff. Quantitative approaches (35%), including structural equation modeling (Khan et al., 2024) and hierarchical regression analysis (Mopkins et al., 2024), offer valuable statistical insights into predictive relationships among psychological capital, organizational support, and well-being outcomes.

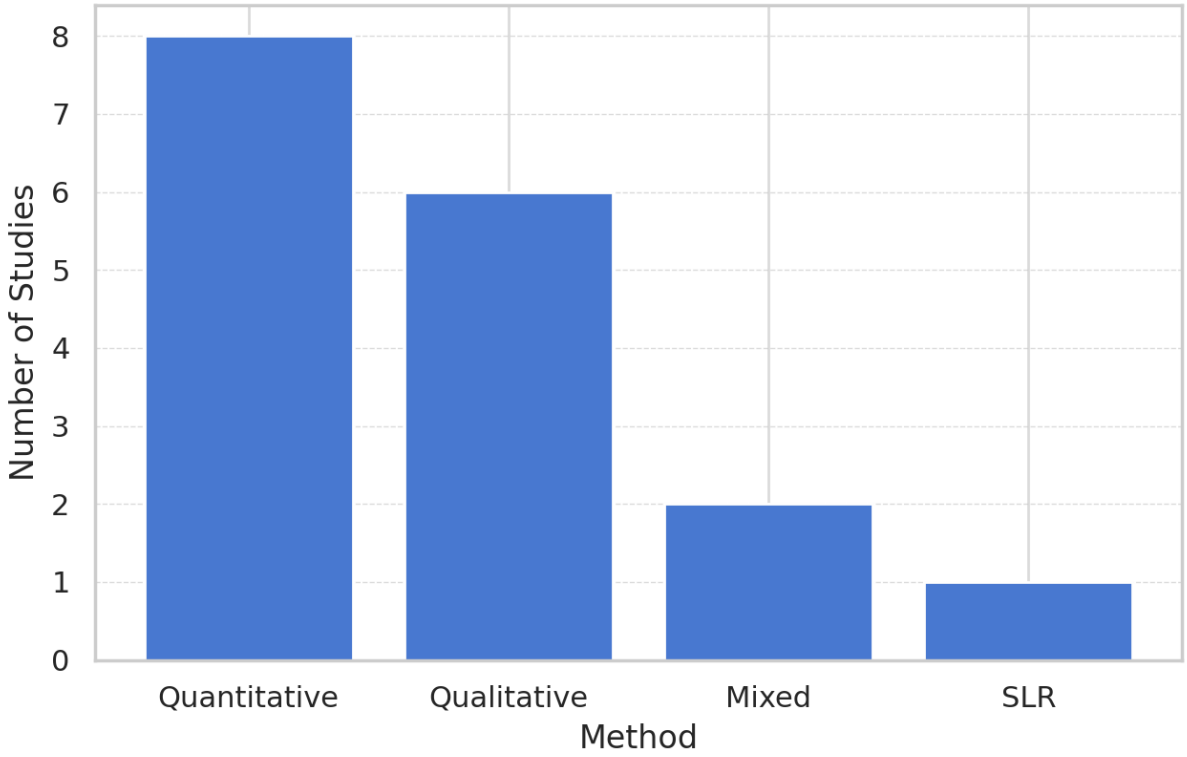

Figure 3. Publication Trend

Meanwhile, mixed-methods research (Soneson et al., 2024; Vesely et al., 2024) bridges empirical rigor with narrative depth, reflecting a gradual convergence between positivist and constructivist paradigms. Only one systematic review (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021)was identified, focusing on management-led interventions to reduce academic stress, a sign that meta-analytic synthesis in this field remains underdeveloped. Together, these patterns indicate that although the conceptual landscape is expanding, the field still lacks large-scale, longitudinal, and intervention-based designs capable of validating causal relationships within complex institutional systems.

Sample sizes across the 17 studies varied widely, ranging from small, in-depth qualitative investigations (n = 9; (Smith et al., 2022) to large-scale cross-sectional surveys (n = 595; (Bożek et al., 2020). This variation illustrates the diversity of research purposes: smaller samples provided rich phenomenological insights into the lived experiences of academics, while larger datasets enabled the identification of broad predictive trends. As depicted in Figure 4, most studies involved 70-300 participants, a moderate range that balances representativeness with depth.

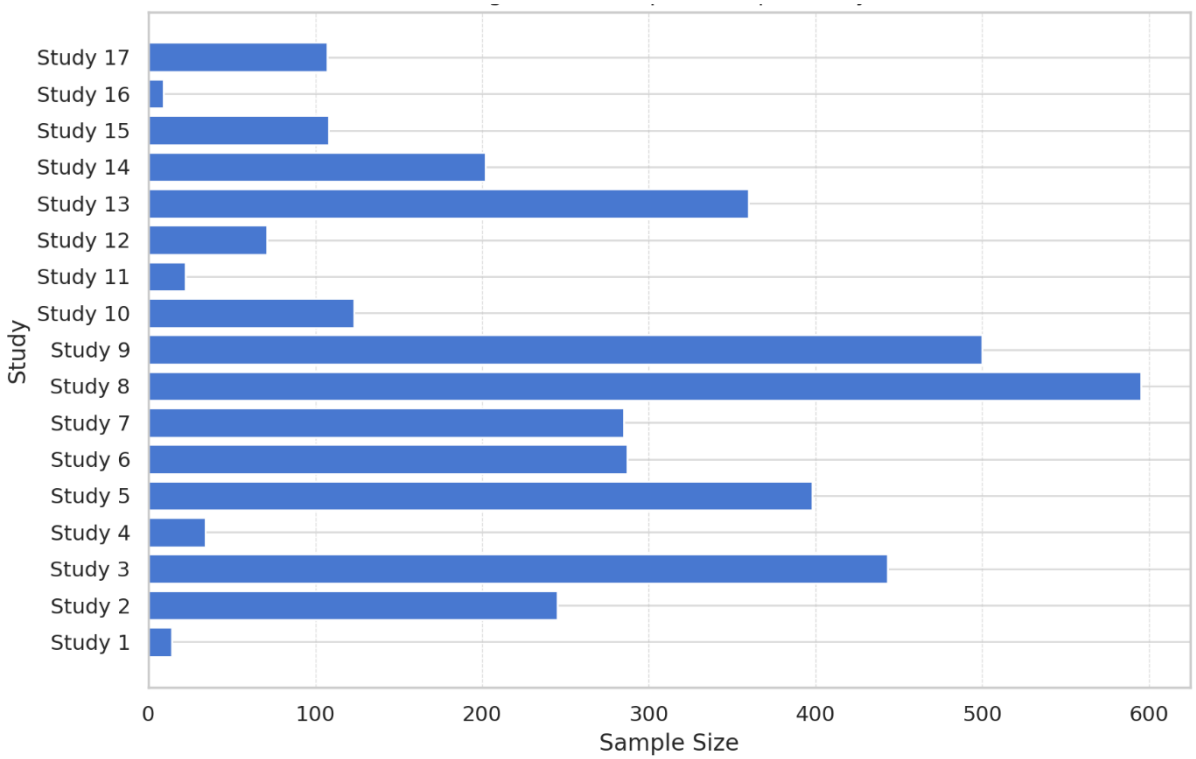

Figure 4. Sample size per study

The distribution of participant profiles also reveals increasing inclusivity: several studies incorporated both faculty and students to analyze bidirectional well-being relationships (Brewster et al., 2022; Cage et al., 2021), while others extended participation to administrators and counselors (Fahdi et al., 2025). Nonetheless, representation remains uneven geographically, with the majority of participants drawn from North American and European institutions, while contributions from the Global South remain limited. This demographic imbalance underscores the need for more cross-cultural comparative research that reflects diverse academic contexts and socio-economic realities.

A comprehensive keyword analysis (Figure 5) revealed dominant clusters centering on "mental health," "well-being," "support," "faculty," "student," "leadership," and "workload." These terms encapsulate the thematic nucleus of contemporary academic well-being discourse. The prominence of "mental health" and "support" underscores the persistent concern for psychological resilience and social connection, while the recurrent appearance of "leadership" and "workload" reflects systemic challenges tied to managerial practices and institutional demands.

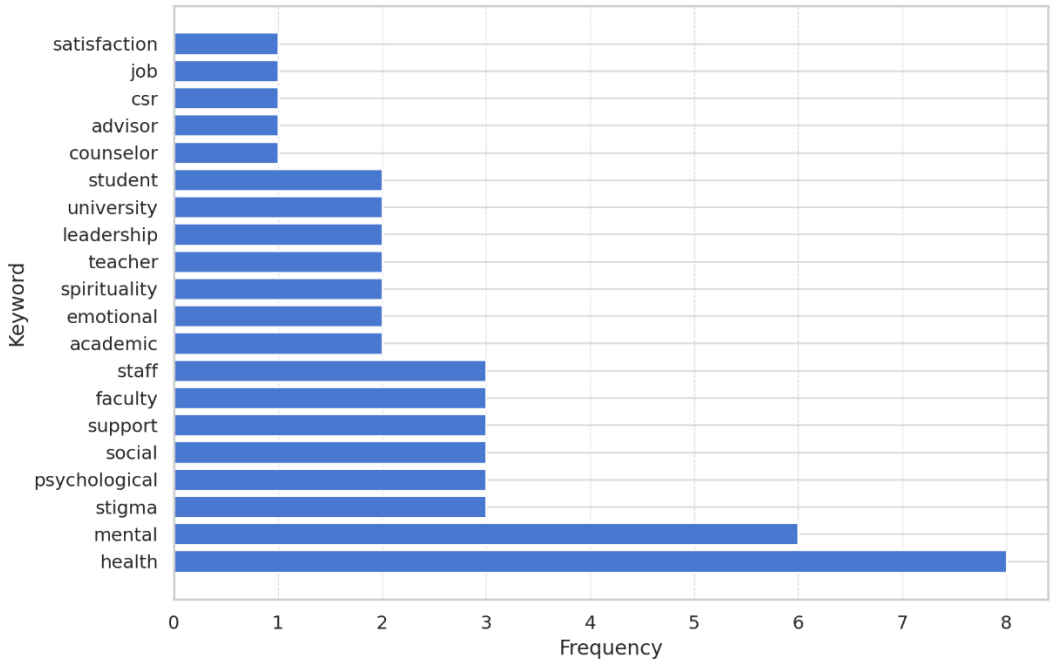

Figure 5. Top Keywords

Interestingly, the rise of keywords such as "digital," "spirituality," and "financial" after 2021 marks the field's diversification toward multidimensional perspectives encompassing technological adaptation, meaning-making, and economic stress. The word frequency visualization shows that the language of well-being is evolving from purely clinical or emotional descriptions to more systemic, ecological, and value-based expressions that emphasize inclusivity, equity, and holistic growth. This lexical shift signifies a disciplinary movement toward recognizing well-being as both a human experience and an institutional responsibility.

Synthesis across all studies yielded eight interrelated dimensions of academic well-being: psychological, social, organizational, spiritual, physical, digital, financial, and cultural policy. The psychological dimension forms the core, encompassing emotional regulation, stress management, resilience, and purpose (Khan et al., 2024; Mopkins et al., 2024). Closely linked is the social dimension, which emphasizes relational belonging, collegial support, and mentoring (Cage et al., 2021; Falco & Shaheed, 2021). The organizational dimension focuses on leadership style, workload distribution, and participatory decision-making, identified as both risk and protective factors for well-being (Borges et al., 2023; Ramluggun et al., 2022). Emerging dimensions such as spiritual and eudaimonic well-being (Bożek et al., 2020; Leung & Pong, 2021) expand the conceptual scope by integrating meaning, harmony, and moral engagement into the academic experience. Similarly, digital well-being reflects the ongoing transformation of academic labor under technological acceleration (Soneson et al., 2024; Yslado-Méndez et al., 2025). Meanwhile, financial well-being (Vesely et al., 2024) foregrounds economic justice and job security as overlooked yet powerful determinants of psychological health.

Finally, cultural–policy well-being (Brewster et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022) situates individual experiences within larger institutional and national frameworks, underscoring the importance of compassionate academic cultures and equitable governance. The radar visualization (Figure 4.5) illustrates the relative distribution of

these dimensions, confirming the dominance of psychological and organizational aspects while emphasizing the growing recognition of digital and cultural contexts as key frontiers in the study of academic well-being.

Discussion

The synthesis of seventeen studies reveals an unmistakable paradigm shift in how mental health and well-being are conceptualized within higher education. Earlier research (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017; Robinson & Gilmore, 2021) approached academic well-being through an individual-coping lens, emphasizing personal resilience, motivation, and stress management. Faculty and staff were framed as autonomous agents responsible for maintaining their psychological balance amid demanding workloads. While such approaches generated valuable insights into self-efficacy and emotional regulation, they inadvertently isolated well-being from the institutional and cultural systems that shape academic life.

From 2020 onward, however, the research trajectory became decisively ecological and systemic. Studies conducted after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brewster et al., 2022; Cage et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022) recognized that mental health outcomes among academics result from interactions among psychological, social, organizational, and policy forces. This integrative orientation parallels global discourses on the Whole-University Approach to mental health, which conceptualizes higher-education well-being as an institutional responsibility rather than a private struggle. In this framework, universities are not merely sites where well-being interventions occur but living ecosystems whose policies, leadership styles, and cultural norms continuously generate or deplete well-being resources.

The organizational environment emerged as the most decisive contextual factor influencing academic well-being. Evidence from Brazil (Borges et al., 2023), the United Kingdom (Ramluggun et al., 2022), and Canada (Smith et al., 2022) demonstrates that bureaucratic overload, managerial opacity, and performance metrics undermine emotional health and professional identity. These structural stressors reflect what researchers call institutional dissonance, a mismatch between universities' espoused values of care and the lived experience of surveillance and competition. However, positive organizational climates can reverse these effects. Studies on compassionate and participatory leadership (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021; Smith et al., 2022) show that empathy, transparency, and distributive justice enhance trust, job satisfaction, and collective efficacy. Leadership thus acts as a mediating bridge between individual resilience and systemic sustainability: when senior managers model vulnerability and care, they legitimize well-being as a shared institutional goal rather than a private weakness. This redefinition of leadership shifts emphasis from control to connection, from supervision to solidarity, signaling a move toward organizational compassion as a governance principle.

While psychological, social, and organizational domains form the structural core of academic well-being, four emergent dimensions are reshaping the field. Digital Well-Being: Post-pandemic transitions accelerated digitalization, prompting new concerns about techno-stress, empathy erosion, and data fatigue (Yslado-Méndez et al., 2025). At the same time, studies such as (Soneson et al., 2024) illustrate that well-designed digital training can improve mental-health literacy among educators. The duality of digitalization both liberating and demanding underscores the need for digital wellness frameworks that balance innovation with human connection. Spiritual and Eudaimonic

Well-Being, Investigations in Poland and Hong Kong (Bożek et al., 2020; Leung & Pong, 2021) reveal that spirituality correlates negatively with anxiety and depression while fostering harmony and meaning in academic work. These findings invite an expansion of well-being beyond the psychological to the existential, emphasizing reflective practices that nurture moral purpose and gratitude. Financial Well-Being (Vesely et al., 2024) identifies a curvilinear relationship between economic security and psychological health: both severe financial strain and excessive material focus can undermine well-being. Social support and intrinsic motivation, however, buffer the adverse effects of low income, suggesting that economic fairness must coexist with cultural appreciation of educators' intrinsic value. Physical Well-Being, The role of bodily health remains underexplored but significant. Demonstrate that leisure physical activity rather than occupational exertion correlates positively with emotional vitality (Robinson & Gilmore, 2021). Universities that invest in accessible recreation and ergonomic environments thus contribute indirectly to mental health and productivity. These emerging dimensions reflect a disciplinary broadening from mental health toward holistic human flourishing in academia, integrating the physical, digital, economic, and spiritual facets of professional life.

Integrating these eight dimensions reveals that academic well-being operates as an interactive network rather than discrete categories. The psychological domain mediates how individuals interpret organizational and social experiences; the social environment modulates stress and meaning; the organizational context provides the structural conditions for agency; and the cultural-policy sphere frames the moral and political boundaries within which all these processes occur. Thus, academic well-being can be conceived as an emergent property of equilibrium among these interdependent domains.

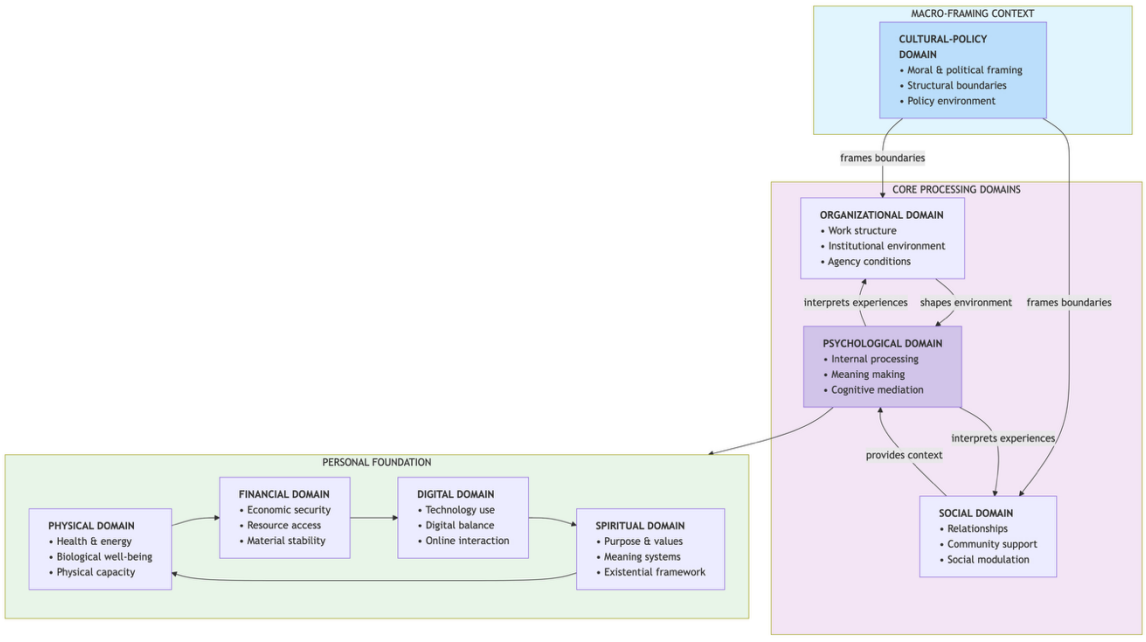

Figure 6. Eight Dimensions Reveals That Academic Well-Being (Assisted by DeepSeek, 2025)

Figure 6 quantifies this interdependence, showing the dominance of psychological and organizational factors, as well as the growing influence of digital and cultural determinants. This finding resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, in which well-being is a function of the fit between the person and the environment. When this fit deteriorates through misaligned workloads, unsupportive leadership, or exclusionary culture, distress emerges; when alignment improves, flourishing becomes possible.

Geographically, the distribution of studies demonstrates both convergence and disparity. Western contexts, particularly the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, produce the majority of research, often emphasizing policy frameworks and leadership reforms. In contrast, studies from Asia (Pakistan, Oman, China, Hong Kong) and Latin America (Brazil, Peru) reveal culturally nuanced stressors, including stigma, limited institutional autonomy, and infrastructural gaps. For instance, (Fahdi et al., 2025) in Oman highlight how religious and cultural taboos constrain open discussions of mental health, whereas (Borges et al., 2023) in Brazil expose the psychosocial toll of resource scarcity in public universities. Despite contextual differences, all regions converge on the importance of social connectedness and organizational justice. This cross-cultural alignment underscores academic well-being as a universal human concern that transcends economic or geographic boundaries, yet manifests differently across socio-cultural ecologies. Future cross-national research could benefit from comparative methodologies that examine how collectivist versus individualist orientations shape coping strategies, or how global south institutions operationalize compassion amid financial austerity. Such work would strengthen the external validity of existing models while enriching global discourse with diverse epistemologies of care.

Findings from this review carry significant implications for higher-education governance and management. First, leadership empathy and participatory decision-making consistently emerge as catalysts for institutional well-being. Universities should therefore move from top-down managerialism toward shared governance structures that empower staff and acknowledge emotional labor as legitimate academic work. Second, workload audits and transparent communication should become standard components of quality assurance, ensuring that expectations align with human capacities. Third, peer-mentoring and collegial dialogue spaces can transform isolated coping into collective learning, fostering what (Brewster et al., 2022) describe as a compassionate culture of mutual care. Finally, well-being initiatives must be integrated with other strategic priorities such as equity, diversity, and sustainability, framing care not as a cost but as an investment in academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review conceptualizes academic well-being as an ecological system of nested layers involving the individual, social, organizational, and culture-policy levels. It highlights eight main dimensions, with psychological well-being as the central, integrative core. The results encourage a reorientation from a focus on individual to ecological-level flourishing among faculty and staff. Therefore, the review suggests the Ecological Model of Academic Well-Being (EAWB), which conceptualizes well-being across four multidirectional, layered levels: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and cultural-systemic. From resilience training for individuals to embedding well-being metrics into institutional evaluations, practical solutions need to be multi-tiered, they said. In the end, academic well-being is affirmed as a fundamental condition for thriving higher education, and not simply an add-on concern. Thus, making

well-being a core institutional value turns universities into compassionate ecosystems where caring for people and promoting excellence are inextricable.

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