



Students' Holistic Development in Higher Education: A Multidimensional Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract

Higher education is more likely to foster rounded growth of students other than standard educational results. The modern discourse of education stresses the fact that the success of students is conditioned by the comprehensive development of cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, career, and digital aspects. Nevertheless, the available literature tends to discuss these areas separately and this has led to the piecemeal picture of student development. To fill this gap, the current research adopts a conceptual research design to integrate the proven theories, empirical literature and the world education frameworks in the context of the holistic development of students in higher education. The paper conceptualizes the holistic development as a dynamic and interconnected process drawing on the perspectives of cognitive, humanistic, developmental, and policy oriented perspectives. The paper presents the seven fundamental dimensions of whole person development in a systematic way and the connections among them, their theoretical basis and conceptual relationships. The paper provides a complex structure combining old educational theories and the recent studies and the international agenda, which contributes to the richness of the conceptualization of the holistic educational research. The suggested viewpoint highlights the topicality of holistic growth in solving the existing higher education issues, such as student well-being, employability, ethical responsibility, and digital transformation. The paper adds to the existing knowledge in higher education by having an all-inclusive conceptual base that can be used in future empirical studies, development of frameworks and teaching practice to produce well-rounded, flexible and socially responsible students.

Keywords: Holistic student development; Higher education; Multidimensional learning; Student well-being; Employability.

1. Introduction

In the modern knowledge society, higher education is also likely to promote not only academic excellence, but also all-round development of students as individuals. The conventional paradigms of higher education have been majorly inclined to perceive cognitive and academic success as the main measure of student success. Nevertheless, it is increasingly becoming clear that to equip students with the multifaceted personal, professional, and social challenges of the twenty-first century, academic learning is not enough (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, the idea of the holistic development of students has become one of the most popular in the educational discourse, and the

theme is the comprehensive development of the cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, career, and digital aspects. The literature highlights the importance of examining student success in a more holistic manner because it is more inclusive and sustainable. The taxonomy of Bloom also emphasizes the value of higher-order cognitive processing in the learning process, but modern understandings acknowledge that emotional well-being, social interactions, and learning conditions have a profound effect on cognitive development (Bloom, 1956; Chaudhry et al., 2024). Humanistic views also underline the fact that an educational process should foster emotional wellbeing, self-awareness and



personal growth in addition to intellectual growth (Rogers, 1961). Empirical research shows that uncontrolled academic stress and psychological issues may negatively influence the learning outcomes and persistence rates of students in higher education (Misra and Castillo, 2004), and well-being and resilience interventions designed well can lead to positive impact on student adaptation and engagement (Pichamuthu et al., 2025; Suresh et al., 2025). Another important aspect of holistic development is social and interpersonal development since learning of students is affected by their interactions, cultural context, and belonging to a community. The theory and research findings focus on employee engagement and inclusive campuses, emphasizing the idea that it improves social integration, leadership, and interpersonal skills (Astin, 1999; Tierney, 1992; UNESCO, 2020). Higher levels of moral reasoning, empathy, and social responsibility are also the outcomes of holistic education that are further developed with the implementation of ethical and value-based development (Kohlberg, 1981; Noddings, 2005; UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, modern higher education needs to respond to new aspects of student development determined by the shift of labour markets, technical progress, and health issues. The notion of employability is becoming more of an amalgamation of transferable skills, flexibility, and lifelong learning as opposed to instantaneous employment (Harvey, 2000; Yorke, 2006; OECD, 2019). On the same note, digital and technological competence has been inseparable to successful learning and engagement with academic and professional settings, and the differences in access to and skills with technology remain an issue (Bates, 2015; Selwyn, 2016; Cho et al., 2025). The physical and health development also forms a background in the support of cognitive performance and psychological stability (WHO, 2018; Pichamuthu et al., 2025). Although there is growing awareness of these various dimensions, research tends to analyse them separately and gives a fractured picture of student development. Considering this gap, the current conceptual paper is set to provide a multidimensional view of holistic development of

students in higher education. The paper aims at conceptualizing holistic development as a connected process by synthesizing the existing theories, modern research, and international frameworks with the aim of offering a fully comprehensive base on the future research, educational practice and policy discussion.

2. Research Methods

The current research design is that of conceptual research design because it suits theory building, clarifying constructs and research framework in a research in higher education. There is no gathering or examination of primary empirical information in conceptual research, and rather, conceptual research depends on the systematization of present academic data designed to create compatible theoretical viewpoints and integrative schemes. This method is especially appropriate to analyze multidimensional and complicated constructs like the overall growth of students in which clarity of concepts and conceptual integration is crucial (Gordon, 2022). The research is based on thematic and integrative research of the current academic literature on the topic of holistic education and student development. The latest and verifiable academic sources were only selected, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and edited volumes explicitly writing on holistic development, integrated learning, character learning, co-curricular involvement, physical health, digital education, and institutional partnership in learning (Aithal et al., 2022; Channa and Alwi, 2024; Isroani and Huda, 2022; Shaikh, 2026). The purpose behind the choice of these sources was their conceptual relevance and the contribution to the holistic development of students in higher institutions of learning. The methodology was carried out by determining common themes, constructs, and developmental areas that were present throughout the literature reviewed as illustrated in Figure 1. These themes were then arranged in a systematic manner into related aspects of the holistic development and conceptual integration and synthesis was possible. The study aims at expressing, developing, and conceptualizing some of the main dimensions of the whole development of students instead of testing hypotheses or developing causal associations. The result of this strategy is a theoretically based

multidimensional lens that can be used to guide future empirical research, model building as well as teaching in higher education settings.

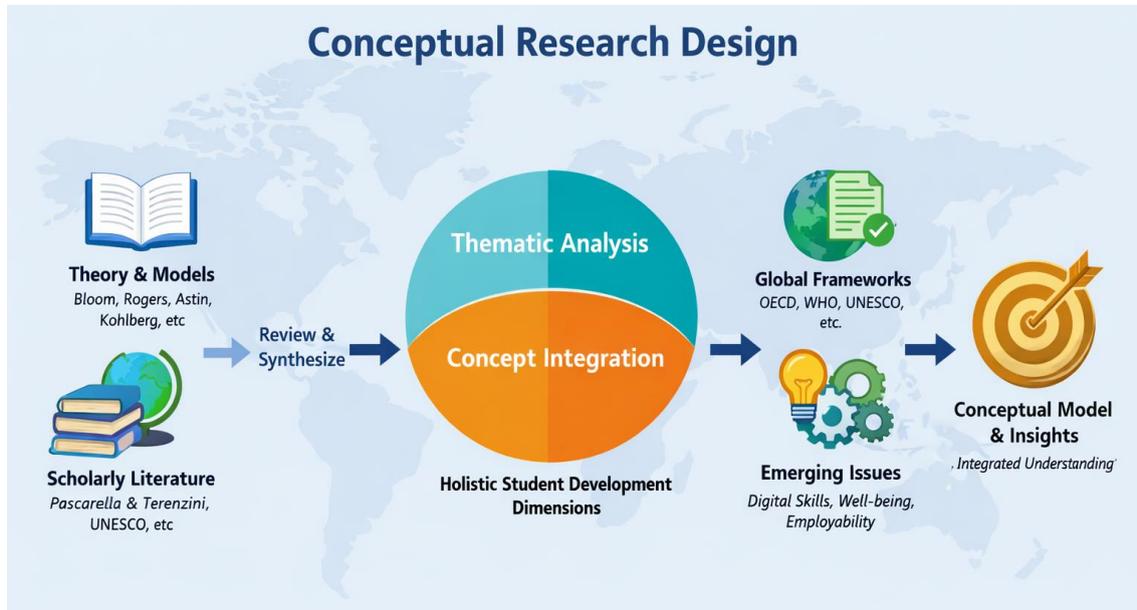


Figure 1 Conceptual Research Design

3. Conceptual Foundations of Students' Holistic Development

3.1. Meaning and Theoretical Origins of Holistic Development

Holistic development in education is an integrative concept that considers students as holistic persons whose development takes place in various, interrelated areas as opposed to just learning academics. The modern approach to the concept of holistic development regards it as the harmonizing development of intellectual, emotional, social, moral, physical, and adaptive abilities that come together to form the personal and professional life of students (Gordon, 2022). The conceptual roots of holistic development are in the educational methods that dispute reductionist perspectives of learning and accentuate the singleness of mind, body, and the social environment. As opposed to perceiving learning outcomes as isolated accomplishments, the concept of holistic development emphasizes the grounds of coherence, integration, and continuity in student development (Aithal et al., 2022).

3.2. Humanistic, Developmental and Constructivist Point of View

Humanistic views are a fundamental basis of holistic

development as they focus on the self-actualization, personal meaning, emotions, and learner-centered education. In this perspective, education is not a process of passing knowledge, but a way of developing awareness of the self, independence, and goal in students (Gordon, 2022). The developmental perspectives also add to the fact that students go through interrelated stages of cognitive, emotional, social and moral growth and they have influence on the others with time. These views bring to the fore the fact that development is not linear or uniform but dynamic and contextual in nature. Constructivist perspectives are complementary to humanistic and developmental perspectives in that they focus on active meaning-making and experiential learning. Learning can be perceived as a process where students derive knowledge through interacting, reflecting, and engaging with real life situations. Recent research suggests that holistic learning environments are associated with students who combine cognitive knowledge with emotional management, interpersonal relationship, and reflection so that their learning outcomes could be deeper and more sustainable (Kashi & Hod, 2025). Collectively, the views offer a solid conceptual



framework of holistic development of the student.

3.3. Difference between Holistic Development and Academic Achievement

Although academic achievement is more of a measurable learning outcome in terms of student grades, test scores, and mastery of subjects, holistic development is a wider range of student development. Academic performance is just one of the aspects of student growth and does not encompass the emotional strength of students, their moral standards, social abilities, physical health, or their agility (Aithal et al., 2022). Holistic development thus includes more than performance measures to incorporate the development of competencies and dispositions that are critical to lifelong learning and well-being.

3.4. Holistic Development and its relevance in Higher Education

The trend in the modern day higher education has increased the applicability of the holistic development due to the increasing rate of technological change, uncertainty in the workforce, and the increasing worries about the welfare of the students. Researchers also point out that colleges and universities should train learners not just to work but to be responsible citizens, make ethical choices, and engage in personal development (Gordon, 2022; Isroani and Huda, 2022). This is why holistic development offers a broad conceptual prism that can be used to address these changing needs, and therefore is an issue of preeminence in contemporary educational theory and practice.

4. Review of Theoretical Perspectives Informing Holistic Development

The notion of students being developed holistically in higher education is based on an eclectic range of education, psychological, policy-oriented theories, which all assert the existence of a multidimensionality of the learning and human development processes. Instead of development being treated as an achievement in the academic world, these two schools of thought emphasize the merging of cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, and adaptive aspects to give a solid intellectual ground to a holistic education. The cognitive taxonomy developed by Bloom offers one

of the first theoretical foundations of the intellectual development in the field of education. The framework based on the hierarchical levels of learning outcomes, i.e., knowledge acquisition and higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, emphasized in Bloom allows noting the role of cognitive complexity in the learning process of students. Despite its initial orientation towards academic education, modern applications see it as applicable to the holistic development process when one combines the higher-order cognitive process with reflective and applied learning experiences, which links intellectual development with the real-world setting (Gordon, 2022). The humanistic theory, especially in the formulation by Rogers, goes a long way in improving the holistic concept of the student growth with the focus on self-actualization, personal meaning, and emotional well-being. In this view, teaching is student centered and is geared towards developing autonomy, self consciousness as well as psychological development in addition to intellectual education. Humanistic principles have a lot in common with the concept of holistic development, endorsing the notion that cognitive growth cannot exist without emotional and personal growth, which is why a more educational environment that takes the entire learner into account is necessary (Gordon, 2022; Aithal et al., 2022). The Student Involvement Theory by Astin is another theory that reinforces the holistic approach because it focuses on the importance of active involvement in the process of student development. The theory assumes that the quality and the quantity of academic and co-curricular activities of the students makes them functions of learning and development. This interaction-focused method offers theoretical application of social, interpersonal, and experiential aspects of the holistic development, and emphasizes that significant learning goes beyond classroom learning (Channa & Alwi, 2024). The theory of moral development developed by Kohlberg has provided a developmental perspective of understanding moral and value based development. The theory presents the progressive aspect of moral judgment and social responsibility by defining phases of moral reasoning.



This framework offers conceptual foundation to the conceptualization of the integration of moral and civic aspects in the comprehensive development, specifically in the context of higher education that

strives to produce responsible and ethical graduates (Isroani & Huda, 2022).

Table 1 Theoretical Perspectives Informing Students' Holistic Development

Theory / Framework	Key Proponent(s)	Core Theoretical Focus	Contribution to Holistic Development Dimensions
Cognitive Taxonomy	Bloom	Hierarchical cognitive learning outcomes and higher-order thinking	Provides foundation for cognitive and academic development, emphasizing critical thinking and applied learning
Humanistic Theory	Rogers	Learner-centered education, self-actualization, emotional growth	Anchors emotional and psychological well-being and supports whole-person learning
Student Involvement Theory	Astin	Learning through active engagement and participation	Supports social, interpersonal, and experiential development beyond the classroom
Moral Development Theory	Kohlberg	Stages of moral reasoning and ethical judgment	Provides basis for ethical and value-based development in higher education
Ethics of Care	Noddings	Relational ethics, empathy, and care in education	Reinforces social, emotional, and ethical dimensions of holistic development
Global Education Frameworks	UNESCO, WHO, OECD	Well-being, lifelong learning, global citizenship, employability	Validate multidimensional holistic development, including health, career, and digital competence

Ethics of Care by Noddings is a complement to the cognitive and moral theories by presupposing relational ethics, empathy, and care as the main focus of education. This view highlights the role of interpersonal relations and emotional attentiveness in ethical development and thus strengthens the social and emotional aspects of wholesome student development (Gordon, 2022). Lastly, holistic development in higher education is contemporary validated by the global frameworks expressed by UNESCO, WHO and OECD as discussed in table 1. These models focus on well-being, lifelong learning, employability, digital competence, and global citizenship as fundamental learning outcomes, which is most consistent with the multidimensional student development models (Gordon, 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2025). These theoretical and global views combined together are a sound conceptualization of

the whole development of the students as an integrated and dynamic process.

5. Dimensions of Students' Holistic Development

Holistic development in higher learning is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes a combination of interconnected aspects among them that are what influence academic achievement, wellbeing and functional life time aspects of learners. In recent literature, researchers stress that developing students cannot be well conceptualized in terms of academic accomplishments only; instead, it is cognitively developed, as well as emotionally, socially, morally, physically, professionally, and digitally (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; UNESCO, 2020). This section is based on the existing theories and recent empirical research to conceptualize seven dimensions of holistic development of students which

is also presented in table 2.

Table 2 Dimensions of Students’ Holistic Development

Dimension	Core Focus	Key Elements	Key Sources
Cognitive & Academic	Intellectual growth and learning outcomes	Critical thinking, problem-solving, mentoring, academic engagement	Bloom (1956); Pascarella & Terenzini (2005); Chaudhry et al. (2024)
Emotional & Psychological	Mental health and emotional resilience	Self-awareness, stress management, resilience, well-being programs	Rogers (1961); Misra & Castillo (2004); Pichamuthu et al. (2025); Suresh et al. (2025)
Social & Interpersonal	Interaction and social integration	Student involvement, inclusion, collaboration, cultural competence	Astin (1999); Tierney (1992); UNESCO (2020); Chaudhry et al. (2024)
Ethical & Value-based	Moral and character development	Ethical reasoning, empathy, care, social responsibility	Kohlberg (1981); Noddings (2005); UNESCO (2021)
Physical & Health	Physical well-being and wellness	Fitness, physical activity, health behaviors	WHO (2018); Pichamuthu et al. (2025)
Career & Employability	Workforce readiness and adaptability	Transferable skills, career planning, lifelong learning	Yorke (2006); Harvey (2000); OECD (2019); Karnataka HE Studies (2024)
Digital & Technological	Digital learning capability	Digital literacy, access, ethical technology use	Bates (2015); Selwyn (2016); Cho et al. (2025)

5.1. Academic and Cognitive Development

The cognitive and academic development is one of the main aspects of student development that is concerned with intellectual abilities of knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, problem-solving, and high-order reasoning. The taxonomy suggested by Bloom offers a framework in that it is based on cognitive learning and classifies it from simple recall of knowledge to higher levels of assessing and synthesising, which is more important in terms of the depth and quality of learning results (Bloom, 1956). Making the same line of thought, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reveal that institutional environments, teaching practices, and student engagement play a significant role in academic development. The recent research also points to the importance of a structured academic support system, like mentoring, in improving the learning experience and academic confidence of higher education students (Chaudhry et al., 2024).

5.2. Emotional and Psychological Well-being

Psychological and emotional health is a part and parcel of students being able to participate meaningfully in the learning and campus life. The humanistic theory also points out the personal development, self-insight and emotional well-being as part and parcel of education (Rogers, 1961). Empirical studies have shown that academic stress, anxiety, and emotional strain are the factors which can have a great impact on the performance and persistence of students unless dealt with (Misra and Castillo, 2004). The recent research within the Indian higher education setting has shown that organized well-being programs and resilience-enhancing interventions have a positive impact on the mental wellness of students, their coping and adjustment (Pichamuthu et al., 2025; Suresh et al., 2025).

5.3. Social and Interpersonal Development

Social and interpersonal development entails the capacity of the students to communicate with other



students, staff, and various societies. The Student Involvement Theory that was presented by Astin argues that learning and development is the service of the active engagement of students in academic and co-curricular activity (Astin, 1999). Tierney (1992) goes ahead to highlight cultural integrity and inclusion as essential to significant student engagement. Inclusion of campus settings, as emphasized by the current frameworks, is critical in promoting collaboration, sense of belonging, and intercultural competence (UNESCO, 2020). More recent research on the issues related to Indian higher education highlights the importance of cultural inclusion programs to reinforce the social integration and interpersonal abilities of students (Chaudhry et al., 2024).

5.4.Value-based and Ethical Development

Value-based and ethical development is concerned with morality, empathy, integrity and social responsibility. The concept of moral development theory formulated by Kohlberg theories of ethical growth is a progressive process of thinking and judgment influenced by social experiences (Kohlberg, 1981). In addition to this, Noddings ethics of care draws our attention to relations ethics, compassion and responsibility as the primary values of education (Noddings, 2005). Value-based education is supported by global education agendas to ensure the culture of sustainable development, social justice, and ethical citizenship (UNESCO, 2021).

5.5.Physical and Health Development

Physical and health development has a great impact on the comprehensive development of students as it supports cognitive functioning as well as emotional stability and social involvement. Studies show that fitness and wellness programs in higher education institutions have a beneficial impact on the energy levels, stress control, and readiness to learning among students (Pichamuthu et al., 2025). On a worldwide scale, the World Health Organization puts special focus on physical activity as one of the determinants of general well-being and lifelong health (WHO, 2018).

5.6.Career and Employability Development

The development of career and employability

includes acquisition of transferable skills, flexibility, and career preparedness. Yorke (2006) theorizes employability as a set of competencies, knowledge and individual qualities that make graduates more viable in the labor market. Harvey (2000) goes on to state that employability is not only limited to job placement but also to lifelong learning and flexibility. The current policy reports indicate the increasingly high significance of skills development in meeting the needs of the evolving labor market (OECD, 2019), and studies in the region focus on the importance of providing career-oriented support systems in higher education (Karnataka Higher Education Studies, 2024).

5.7.Digital and Technological Competence

Technological and digital adequacy has become an important dimension of holistic development in digitally mediated learning settings. Bates (2015) discusses the importance of digital literacy to improve the learning effectiveness and learner autonomy and Selwyn (2016) explains the social and ethical concerns of the educational technology. According to the recent research, the key factors that impact digital participation among students in Indian higher education include digital access, skills gap, and institutionalisation (Cho et al., 2025).

5.8.Discussion on interconnectedness

The development of students is holistic and therefore integrative in nature and each area of development is dynamically shaped and supported by the other. The cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, career, and digital dimensions are not separate or autonomous realms, but a cohesive system that together can influence the learning process and development of students in higher learning (Gordon, 2022; Aithal et al., 2022). This interconnectedness is critical to conceptualize holistic development in terms of being a process that is relational and continuous. Emotional and psychological well-being are closely related to cognitive and academic development because motivation, emotional control, and mental health play an important role in determining the ability of students to think critically and learn in the long term. Studies of holistic learning contexts postulate that emotionally supportive settings increase the engagement of students, their



ability to reflect on learning and their academic persistence (Kashi & Hod, 2025). Likewise, cognitive growth is supported by social and interpersonal development, which helps to develop the skills of collaborative learning, communication, and the construction of knowledge supported by peers (Channa & Alwi, 2024). The aspect of ethical and value-based development overlaps with social and emotional aspects in the development of empathy, moral judgment and responsible conduct. The frameworks of holistic education point out that ethical awareness is developed through relational experience, metacognitive discussion, and contextual learning instead of by solitary teaching (Isroani and Huda, 2022). The physical and health growth also contributes towards holistic development and helps in the functioning of the mind, emotional stability and participating in social life. Research in the field of physical education and motor learning proves that physical health has a positive impact on psychological strength and learning preparedness (Sacko et al., 2025; Thompson et al., 2022). Another way in which career and employability development are closely connected with other aspects of holistic development is the fact that they are also closely connected. Adaptability, communication, ethical judgment, and digital literacy are some of the transferable skills that are developed through the combination of academic education, socialization, and experience (Aithal et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2025). Similarly, digital and technological competence overlaps with cognitive, social and ethical aspects because it determines how learners access information, collaborate and participate in digital spaces in a responsible manner (Shaikh, 2026). Combined, these interconnections underscore the fact that holistic development is not a cumulative process of building up skills but synergistic process where growth in one dimension reinforces the growth in other dimensions. This appreciation of the dynamic interplay can be seen as a conceptual basis of the understanding student development as a whole and thus supporting the importance of multidimensional approaches to understanding higher education.

5.9. Implications of Holistic Development in Higher Education

The holistic view of student development has major implications on the field of higher education in theory, practice and policy. The first one involves the change of learning targets that are focused on the achievement of the predetermined academic objectives to the development of well-rounded graduates who are not only cognitively competent but also emotionally resilient, ethically mindful, and adaptive. The holistic development models promote the notion that the institutions perceive learning as a multidimensional process that includes intellectual development in addition to personal and social development (Gordon, 2022; Aithal et al., 2022). In the pedagogical perspective of teaching and learning, holistic development puts significant emphasis on learner-centered and experiential pedagogies. Cognitive, emotional, and social abilities can be simultaneously developed with the help of educational practices that involve reflection learning, cooperative work, and practical use. Research on holistic learning environment indicates that these learning practices improve student engagement, motivation, and greater learning outcomes (Kashi & Hod, 2025; Channa and Alwi, 2024). Incorporation of the values, ethical thinking, and well-being aspects into the curricula reinforces moral thinking and personal development of students even more (Isroani and Huda, 2022). The well being and support systems of the students is also implicated by holistic development. The acknowledgment of the interdependence of the developmental aspects underscores the importance of the environments that would encourage psychological safety, physical wellbeing, and meaningful social interaction. Studies focus on the idea that emotional well-being and physical wellness are beneficial factors in terms of academic persistence and the overall student outcomes (Sacko et al., 2025; Thompson et al., 2022). Besides this, holistic development makes higher education more relevant to the modern society needs and the workforce requirements. The concept of career readiness and employability is beginning to be viewed as the result of an integrated learning experience that can lead to adaptability, digital competence, ethical judgment, and lifelong learning orientation (Aithal et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al.,



2025). A holistic approach to higher education would enable the institution to equip the students to survive in a complex professional, technological, and social environment.

5.10. Directions for Future Research

Although the paper is a conceptual paper that offers an integration approach to the holistic development of students, a number of research opportunities in the future arise. To test and confirm the multidimensional framework, which is presented in this paper, empirical studies are required to operationalize the multidimensional framework. Quantitative research has the potential to design and test measurement scales of each of the dimensions of holistic development, whereas qualitative studies can examine how students lived their lives of holistic development in a variety of higher education settings (Gordon, 2022; Aithal et al., 2022). Second, the study of the dynamic associations between the dimensions of holistic development should be considered in future research based on longitudinal and mixed-method studies. These studies may allow more insight into the interaction of cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, career, and digital arenas after time and their impact on the student results (Kashi and Hod, 2025; Kurniawan et al., 2025). The knowledge of such interactions may also be used to refine holistic development models and theory-building. Third, there is need to conduct comparative and contextual studies that will cover the ways in which holistic development occurs in disciplines, types of institutions, and cultural contexts. Such fields as digital pedagogy, well-being-oriented education, and performance-based systems of developing students present new avenues worth exploring (Shaikh, 2026; Channa & Alwi, 2024). Taken together, these studies can add to the theoretical and practical applicability of the holistic development models and contribute to evidence-based progress in higher education.

Conclusion

The conceptual paper is forward-looking in its multidimensional view of holistic development of students in higher education as it summarizes the modern theories, models and international ideas. Getting out of the trenches of merely concentrating

on academic achievement, the paper theorizes the holistic development as a comprehensive process that entails cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, physical, professional and digital levels of development. Based on the humanistic, developmental, constructivist, and policy-oriented frameworks, the study provides a solid intellectual ground upon which the holistic development is justified as a matter of concern in the scholarship of higher learning. As noted in the analysis, these developmental aspects are highly intertwined, as developmental factors in one of the aspects support the development in other areas. It is in this sense of interconnectedness that the idea of student development has to be seen not as a system of detached results but as a process that continuously evolves. The paper helps bring some theoretical coherence to a field where there has been a lack of consistency in the literature in the various disciplines and domains. On the whole, this paper supports the applicability of holistic development in addressing modern concerns in the spheres of higher education, such as student well-being, employability, ethical responsibility, and digital transformation. The provided conceptual insights may be used in future empirical studies, frameworks, and educational discussions in order to raise the graduates who are well-rounded, versatile and socially responsible.

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