

# **BEHIND THE RANKS: NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN NLUs**

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## **Introduction: The Hidden Crisis in Law Schools**

National Law Universities (NLUs), often seen as the epitome of legal education in India, are environments of relentless academic and competitive pressure. From maintaining high CGPAs to excelling in moots, ADR competitions, internships, and publications, students are expected to perform at a consistently high level. While these institutions were envisioned as spaces of excellence and opportunity, they have increasingly become pressure cookers where many silently struggle. Over the past few years, several tragic student suicides have been reported across NLUs including NLU Odisha, NALSAR, NLUJ, and GNLU raising urgent questions about the state of mental health in these elite institutions. Despite rising awareness, discussions around mental health are still often overshadowed by a culture that equates struggle with weakness. This blog is a call for awareness, empathy, and collective accountability. It is a reminder that behind the ranks and resumes are human beings navigating complex emotional battles that deserve recognition, compassion, and systemic support.

## **The Pressure Cooker: Academic and Competitive Stress**

Unlike many other professional courses, law school pressures do not build gradually. They arrive swiftly often within the first semester creating a sink-or-swim environment. Students, many of whom are still adjusting to living away from home and adapting to a new social world, are expected to simultaneously decode the curriculum, secure internships, and position themselves for career-defining competitions. This early onset of academic hyper-competition has contributed to a growing wave of students seeking online classes or taking temporary withdrawals from active academic life not for lack of ability, but as a strategy of self-preservation.

What is particularly alarming is how deeply institutional recognition is tied to quantifiable success. Certificates, accolades, and rankings dominate conversations, often sidelining genuine curiosity or intellectual exploration. A student's value can feel reducible to how many moots they've won or how prestigious their internship was, rather than the quality of their learning or the integrity of their thought.

The competitive ethos, in its current form, has also led to a normalization of chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout. What once may have been an environment for holistic growth and critical thought has increasingly become a battleground of performativity. In the process, the very ideals that bring students to law school justice, equity, and empowerment are often eclipsed by the toxic pursuit of an ever-expanding resume.

In this light, the question that needs urgent attention is not whether students can survive law school, many do- but what they lose in the process. Can legal education afford to remain indifferent to the emotional and psychological cost of its current structure? And more importantly, can we reimagine excellence in a way that centres not just outcomes, but well-being?

## **The Unspoken Divide: Inequality in a Supposedly Meritocratic Space**

NLU's were envisioned as institutions of merit, accessible to all through a common entrance exam the CLAT. In theory, this standardization promised equality of opportunity. In practice, however, it has reinforced old hierarchies through new, subtler means. CLAT, with its heavy reliance on English comprehension and reasoning in a culturally decontextualized format, privileges students from English-medium urban schools and families with access to elite coaching institutions. For students from rural backgrounds, vernacular-medium schools, and

economically disadvantaged communities, the test often feels less like a common entrance and more like a closed gate.

This divide does not vanish upon admission, it intensifies. Within law school campuses, proficiency in English, comfort with academic jargon, and familiarity with urban etiquette often become unspoken currencies of acceptance and respect.

Students from small towns or under-resourced schools frequently find themselves marginalized, not only academically but socially.

One student shared that they were laughed at in class for mispronouncing a Latin legal term. Another recounted being mocked for wearing traditional attire and having an ‘uncool’ accent, small moments that accumulate into deep, lasting wounds. While some students naturally find community in friend groups or regional circles, others are left adrift eating alone in mess halls, studying alone in libraries, and spending long hours in classrooms without conversation or companionship. These aren’t isolated experiences. They represent a silent epidemic of exclusion that chips away at confidence and belonging. “I don’t even speak in class anymore,” a second-year student confided, “because I’m tired of being corrected, or worse, pitied.”

This isolation is not just social; it has direct consequences on mental health and academic performance. Without networks of support, these students navigate already demanding academic structures with little emotional cushion. The subtle elitism of law school culture from inside jokes to how clubs are run and internships are recommended, makes it clear who belongs and who is merely tolerated.

To call NLUs purely meritocratic is to ignore these structural realities. True meritocracy does not begin and end with a competitive exam, it requires institutions to recognize and address the uneven starting lines that students come from. Equity in legal education demands not just access, but active inclusion, in classrooms, in conversations, and in communities. Until then, many will continue to sit in silence, their struggles invisible but no less real.

## **The Institutional Response: Are We Doing Enough?**

In recent years, several National Law Universities have taken steps to address student mental health through the establishment of mental health cells, the appointment of counsellors, and periodic awareness sessions. These initiatives represent a recognition of the growing psychological strain students face. However, while well-intentioned, such measures often fall short in execution. In many institutions, counselling services remain underutilized due to issues of accessibility, stigma, irregular availability, or lack of confidentiality. Furthermore, the mental health discourse tends to be event-driven limited to occasional workshops or mental health “weeks” rather than forming part of a sustained, integrated support structure. This sporadic engagement risks reducing mental health initiatives to symbolic gestures, rather than effecting meaningful cultural or institutional change. A deeper, systemic commitment is required one that acknowledges mental health not as an auxiliary concern but as a fundamental pillar of a humane and effective educational environment.

### **A Call to Kindness: What We All Can Do**

Beyond institutional efforts, the onus also lies on individuals—students, faculty, and administrators to build a culture grounded in empathy and solidarity. A competitive academic space need not be devoid of compassion. Small acts like checking in on a peer, choosing not to mock someone’s background or language, actively listening, and simply being present can create powerful shifts in the emotional climate of a law school. Faculty members, too, play a pivotal role by being more approachable, creating safer classroom spaces, and responding with sensitivity to students in distress. Simultaneously, students should be encouraged to seek help without shame, recognizing that mental health challenges are neither rare nor a reflection of personal inadequacy. In a setting often defined by individual achievements and hierarchies, we must consciously cultivate a peer culture that is inclusive, non-comparative, and supportive. Ultimately, law schools must foster not just bright minds, but good allies because we rise, quite literally, by lifting others.

### **Conclusion: Reimagining the NLU Space**

The mental health crisis in law schools is not an incidental by-product of academic rigor, it is a structural and cultural issue that demands intentional reform. NLUs must evolve from institutions that prioritise performance to those that prioritize people. Systemic change is imperative: from rethinking evaluation models and pedagogy to implementing lasting, student-centred wellness policies. However, change does not lie solely in policy, it begins in mindset. It begins with the understanding that legal education, at its core, should empower rather than exhaust; it should build not only competent professionals but resilient, empathetic individuals. A reimagined NLU is one where rigor and compassion coexist, where community thrives alongside ambition, and where no student feels unseen or unheard. The challenge is urgent, and the responsibility is shared. As members of this academic community, we must reflect, engage, and act because the cost of inaction is far too high.