


Chapter 1

Healthy Minds, Thriving Campuses: Promoting Mental Health and Wellness Among Students In Universities

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ABSTRACT

Mental health among university students represents a significant public health issue, as numerous studies have highlighted its effects on both student well-being and academic success. Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive research addressing the factors that lead to the decline of mental health, particularly the obstacles that hinder students from seeking psychological assistance. It is essential to collect evidence on this matter to inform policies, advocacy efforts, and enhance mental health services within higher education. This study examines the specific challenges encountered by university students and identifies the elements that affect their well-being and academic involvement, including those intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the research delves into the underlying causes of mental health issues, the barriers to accessing mental health services, and strategies to promote the mental well-being of university students.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are essential in influencing the future trajectories of students by providing avenues for both personal and academic development. Nevertheless, this path is fraught with difficulties. Students entering higher education frequently encounter issues related to adjustment, academic pressures, and mental health challenges, all of which can profoundly affect their well-being and academic success. It is vital to comprehend the intricate relationship between these obstacles and students' mental health to offer effective support and foster an environment conducive to student flourishing (Ross, 1999; Ong and Cheong, 2009). The importance of recognizing how stress and mental health affect students in higher education cannot be emphasized enough. Studies indicate a strong correlation between students' mental health and their academic performance, physical health, and social interactions (Fletcher, 2009;

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Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Furthermore, students' overall well-being is closely linked to their success in higher education. Acknowledging the complex nature of these challenges and their implications for students' lives is a crucial step in meeting their needs.

Students frequently face challenges when transitioning from secondary education to higher education. This shift is often characterized by variations in curricula, pedagogical approaches, and expectations between secondary schools and universities, which can result in what is termed academic shock (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012). Academic shock encompasses the considerable and at times overwhelming difficulties that students may face upon entering a higher education setting. These difficulties typically stem from the disparities in teaching styles, curricula, expectations, and the overall academic rigor between secondary education and university or college. Students find themselves in a more autonomous and demanding learning environment, which may involve larger class sizes, more intricate course content, elevated expectations for self-directed learning, and increased academic accountability. Consequently, students may initially struggle to adjust to these new academic requirements, potentially leading to stress, anxiety, and challenges in their academic performance. The research conducted by Fook and Sidhu (2015) examines various learning obstacles faced by students in higher education, highlighting the complex nature of these challenges.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Mental health represents a multifaceted challenge for students in Malaysian educational institutions, shaped by various pressures, including academic, financial, and physical health issues. Research has highlighted academic pressure as a significant factor contributing to mental health difficulties, revealing its extensive impact on students' overall well-being. Omar et al. (2020) emphasized that academic stress intensifies mental health issues, while Aris and Othman (2022) posited that it is a primary motivator for Malaysian academics seeking mental health support. Rashid, Othman, and Ibrahim (2018) reiterated that academic pressure is the leading cause of mental health disorders. It is the most critical factor associated with depression among students. Furthermore, financial worries, in conjunction with academic stress, significantly affect mental health. There is a strong link between financial stress and mental health issues. Tan, Audrey, and Cheah (2018) illustrated how mental health can influence financial decision-making behaviors. Additionally, mental health challenges are compounded by physical health factors, such as inadequate sleep, poor nutrition, and insufficient physical activity. Ng et al. (2020) found that students with subpar physical health reported elevated levels of stress and anxiety, whereas Congsheng, Kayani, and Khalid (2022) suggested that regular physical exercise is a crucial predictor of mental health outcomes. This interplay of factors underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address the various contributors to mental health issues within Malaysian academic settings. By addressing these interconnected elements, institutions can more effectively support their students' mental health and improve their overall well-being.

Mental health significantly influences students' academic performance (Suhaimi et al., 2024). The prevalence of mental health issues among university students is alarming and indicates a widespread concern. Factors such as academic pressure, financial difficulties, and social obstacles may contribute to these mental health challenges. It is crucial to address these issues, as ongoing psychological distress can impair cognitive abilities, diminish focus, and adversely impact academic success (Suhaimi et al., 2024). The relationship between mental health and academic performance is apparent from an early age.

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