

## **The Prevalence of Mental Health among Malaysian University Students**

Suhaili Arifin, Siti Salina Abdullah, Nor Ezdianie Omar

Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Development, University Malaysia Terengganu  
Malaysia

Nurshuhada Mohamed

Faculty of General Studies & Advanced Education, University Sultan Zainal Abidin Malaysia

Yusni Mohamad Yusop

Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia Malaysia

Noor Muthmainnah Hamdul Hadi

Centre for Foundation & Continuing Education, University Malaysia Terengganu Malaysia

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### **Abstract**

The mental health among university students should be given close, and more proper, attention due to the fact that they are the national asset in years to come. Life in the university can be pressurizing to the students as they have to grapple with the process of adaptation, family separation, relationship issues, financial issues, health issues and many others. Nonetheless, the university is not the place to solve a student's personal problems. Instead, they have to deal with the problems themselves using the resources and facilities that have been provided to them. Those students who fail to manage these challenges are highly exposed to mental health problems and further lead to the academic underperformance. Hence, mental health issues are crucial to be addressed to improve their wellbeing and success. Therefore, this study is conducted to identify the mental health level of the Malaysian students in the university. A total of n=810 students was chosen using a simple random sampling technique. This study employs the Mental Health Inventory (MHI) to collect the data. The result indicates that more than half respondents had moderate to high level of psychological distress =68.9%, anxiety =72.7%, and depression =60.6%. Meanwhile for loss of behavioral or emotional control=42.8% were at moderate to high level. In conclusion, even so the level of mental health among university students needs to be emphasized as the moderate level for this overall psychological distress can change to a higher level. Based on the findings, several suggestions have also been discussed.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, University Students, Descriptive Analysis

### **Introduction**

The lives of the people today have become more challenging and complex as a result of the increased urbanization and globalization (Arifin et al., 2022). These challenges occur due to the drastic changes in all aspects of human lives such as politics, economy, social, culture, science and technology, also life demands. This leads to various psychological and psychosocial problems toward the individuals, especially university students and the society as a whole (Husin et al., 2022; Arifin et al., 2022; & Fauzi et al., 2021; Wan Marzuki, 2016). According to Fauzi et al (2021), university students are individuals who are in the critical transition phase. At their age during this time, there will be a transitional process from teenager to adult, whereby it can be one of the most stressful times in a person's life (Fauzi et al., 2021). They will tend to feel stressed when they are confronting difficulties in adapting to the new environment after they have left school and as they move to the university (Clinciu, 2013).

According to Stamp et al (2015), stress happens when university students have to face the music that they are living far away from home, and they have to manage themselves in terms of the personal finance, building friendships and learning to adapt to the new system. They have to fulfil the expectation on them based their academic achievements such as exams, quizzes, time management and the number of subjects taken at one time where all these elements can become the stress factor for the students (Beiter et al., 2015). For university students who come from a low socioeconomic background with financial problems, it was also reported that they have a greater level of depression, anxiety and stress (Archuleta, 2013).

Unfortunately, students who are not able to handle stress well and are often in extreme stress will tend to be exposed to mental health issues (Saharudin et al., 2020; Mohd Farhan, Arifai, & Yusof, 2021). The mental health issue among university students today is alarming. Statistics has shown that there is an ongoing trend of increase on the mental health issues among this particular group. Based on the Health and Morbidity National Survey Statistics (2015) it was exposed that one of three adults aged 16 years and above is dealing with mental problems.

Meanwhile, a survey by National Health and Morbidity (2019) indicates that the prevalence of mental health problems among Malaysian adults has increased from 8.9% in 2012, to 10.7% in 2015, to 31.1 % in 2019 (MIASA, 2019). The results also demonstrate that majority cases were reported as Malaysian students (Fauzi et al., 2021). Another survey report, from National Mental Health (2017) shows an increase in suicide cases among mental patients as well. The survey finds that at least one from 10 youths or 10 percent from 5.5 million youths in this country have thought of killing themselves.

Hence, it is a crucial step to detect and provide early deterrence of mental health problems among university students (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). This issue should be given a more serious attention as it can invite various negative implications, as university students are an invaluable asset to the development of human capital to this country. A good mental health serves as a foundation for university students' well-being and their ability to adapt to the

challenges both in the university and life as a whole (Pheng, Wan Jaafar & Mohd Nor, 2019; Fauzi et al., 2021; Syahira et al., 2018). Such a strong bedrock will contribute to the process of learning, communication, endurance and a more positive self-confidence that are essential to the students' wellbeing.

### **Problem Statement**

Mental health is defined as a good mental state, where an individual realizes about his or her own ability, is able to overcome life pressures in a normal way, is able to work productively and is able to contribute to the society (World Health Organization (WHO), 2004). Mental health is a very important element in the life of a student at the university as it is the determining factor of his or her success holistically. However, a lot of students are grappling with failure issues in terms of managing and adapting themselves in a different environment, that eventually will impose some kind of pressure, anxiety and depression among the students (Norazila et al., 2018).

Recently, a study among Malaysian university students depicts that the majority of the respondents experienced depression by having negative feelings, like anxiety and stress, experiencing mouth dryness, and finding it difficult to become enthusiastic (Hassan et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in a study by Kamaluddin et al (2020), around 30% of the university students were reported to experience some level of anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a serious crisis because persistent mental illness will ruin students' academic performance and overall life potentials, including their social relations with friends, family members and lecturers at the university (Syahira et al, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2021; Husin et al., 2022; Pheng et al., 2019).

Based on the outcome of previous studies, there is also evidence that students suffering from mental health issues will bring about various bad impacts on the students' physical state such as prolonged headache, lack of appetite, and even loss in appetite (Damota et al., 2019; Pheng et al., 2019). What is worse, due to chronic mental issues, it sometimes ends in suicidal behavior. Addressing these issues is crucial to improve the overall performance and wellbeing status among university students. The depression, anxiety and any kind of mental health problems must be given greater attention and immediate treatment. Without a good mental state, they may be unable to cope with challenges in the university and this can lead to them suffering from mental problems. If the mental problem is not well treated, there will be huge negative consequences Hassan et al (2022), not only to them but to this country as well.

Previously, the statistics concerning mental health issues among Malaysians is growing every year. However, there is very little research that specifically investigates the university students' mental health status toward anxiety, depression, and the loss of emotional or behavioral control as well. This is a vital area of research because the mental health must be seen from different perspectives to ensure that the treatment given is accurate and precise, with the mental issues faced. Therefore, this study aims to determine the prevalence of mental health problems among undergraduate students consisting of anxiety, depression, and loss of emotional or behavioral control at a local university in Malaysia.

### Methodology

This study uses a descriptive research design. The researcher implements this study in University Putra Malaysia in Selangor. The approval from the university and faculty was obtained by the researcher prior to the study to gain the permission to conduct the study. The respondents consist of n=900 students that were selected using the simple random sampling technique. Before the instrument was distributed, all the respondents were contacted and they were given the informed consent forms to get their agreement and to confirm their participation. The instruments were administered to n=900 respondents, but unfortunately only n=810 respondents had given the feedback.

The instrument used in this study comprises of 2 sets of instruments divided into section A and section B. Section A concerns with the sample's demographic information related to the sample's gender. For section B, it is a Mental Health Inventory (MHI) developed by Veit and Ware (1983) to see the mental health level of an individual. MHI comprises of two dimensions, namely psychological distress and psychological wellbeing containing 38 items. However, this study only uses the first dimension (psychological distress) that has three sub-scales (1) anxiety, (2) depression, dan (3) loss of emotional or behavioral control.

There are 24 items in the psychological distress dimension, whereas 9 items for the anxiety sub-scale, 4 items for depression sub-scale, and 9 items for loss of emotional or behavioral control. The scale for items 2, 3, 8\*, 11, 13, 14\*, 15,16, 18\* 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 38 is from 1 to 6 points; whereas for items 9, 28 the range is from 1 to 5 points. For the items marked \* the scale has to be turned the other way around prior to the score calculation. Refer to Table 1 for the items under psychological distress dimension and the items for every sub-scale (anxiety, depression, and loss of emotional or behavioral control). For table 2, it shows the scoring method for the psychological distress dimension and every sub-scale under that dimension.

Table 1  
*Items in Mental Health Inventory*

Dimension	
Psychological Distress	2, 3, 8*, 9, 11, 13, 14*, 15,16, 18*, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 38
Subscale	
Anxiety	3, 11, 13, 15, 25, 29, 32, 33 and 35
Depression	9, 19, 30 and 36
Loss control of emotional or behavioral	8, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 24, 27 and 28

Table 2  
*Mental Health Inventory Scoring*

Dimension	Scores
Psychological Distress	24-142
Subscale	
Anxiety	9-54
Depression	4-23
Loss control of emotional or behavioral	9-53

Reliability relates with the extent to which the items in the measurement tool are effective and appropriate to be applied to the study. This is substantial, so that the error can be minimized. A measurement tool is said to have a high reliability value when the same score is obtained by the same individual when he or she answers the same measurement tool only at different times (Sidek, 2011). In the context of this study, researcher will do the test two times to measure the extent of the reliability of MHI.

One of them was the pilot study on 30 students who had the similarities with the actual study at UPM, and the second time was the actual study on 810 students. The reliability value of MHI in this study was tested with the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS version 20.0) software using the Alpha Cronbach statistics. The reliability coefficient value more than  $\alpha = .60$  was good and could be adopted in the study (Mohd Majid, 1993). In the pilot study, the reliability index of MHI was high, which is  $\alpha = .73$ ; whereas in the actual study it was also high, which is  $\alpha = .76$ . Refer to Table 3 below. This result proves that MHI is a consistent and reliable measurement tool.

Table 3

*Mental Health Inventory Reliability*

<b>Mental Health Inventory Reliability</b>	<b>Cronbach alpha (<math>\alpha</math>)</b>
Pilot study	.73
Actual study	.76

**Result and Discussions**

A total of 900 respondents were involved in this study, however only 810 respondents completed the questionnaire administered. Table 4 shows the demographic of the respondents. There were 313 males (38.6%) and 497 females (61.4%) participating in this study.

Table 4

*Respondents' Gender*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Male	313	38.6
Female	497	61.4
Total	810	100

In Table 5 below, it shows the level of psychological distress of the respondents. More than half respondents had moderate to high psychological distress,  $n = 558$  (68.9 %). Meanwhile, 237 (29.3%) respondents had low psychological distress, and 15 (1.9%) had high level of psychological distress. The mean value and standard deviation for psychological distress of the respondents are respectively 71.8 and 15.9.

Table 5

*The level of Respondents' Psychological Distress*

<b>Psychological Distress</b>	<b>Level</b>			<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>High</b>		
Frequency	237	558	15	71.8	15.9
Percentage	29.3	68.9	1.9		

Next, in Table 6 a majority of respondents were shown to have anxiety, which is 589 respondents (72.7%) and depression 491 respondents (60.6%) at respectively moderate to high levels. There was a low level of anxiety found in 168 respondents (20.7%) and high level of anxiety in 53 respondents (6.5%). For depression, 220 respondents (27.2%) were at low level and 99 respondents (12.2%) had high level of anxiety. This is different with the loss of behavioral or emotional control, where the majority stayed at low level,  $n = 459$  (56.7%), followed by moderate to high  $n = 347$  (42.8%), and high level  $n = 4$  (0.5%). The mean values for anxiety, depression, and loss of emotional or behavioral control were respectively 29.7, 12.6, and 24.6. The standard deviation values for all three sub-scales were 6.76, 3.36, and 6.45 respectively.

Table 6

*The level of Respondents' Psychological Distress sub scales*

Psychological Distress Sub scales		Level			Mean	SD
		Low	Moderate	High		
Anxiety	Frequency (n)	168	589	53	29.7	6.76
	Percent (%)	20.7	72.7	6.5		
Depression	Frequency (n)	220	491	99	12.6	3.36
	Percent (%)	27.2	60.6	12.2		
Loss of behavioural or emotional control	Frequency (n)	459	347	4	24.6	6.45
	Percent (%)	56.7	42.8	0.5		

The results of this study have increased the understanding regarding the mental health status among the Malaysian university students. The results depict that majority of Malaysian students in higher institutions indicate that they had moderate to higher level of severity depression, anxiety, stress, and emotional issues. This study outcome is consistent with that of Fauzi et al (2021), who had conducted a study on how far the issues of stress, anxiety, and depression affect the academic learning and performance of university students. The study was carried out at the Faculty of Health Sciences at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Puncak Alam, Malaysia involving first, second, third, and fourth years of three academic courses namely Medical Laboratory Sciences, Medical Imaging, and Nursing. In their study, the result of stress, anxiety, and depression are commonly present (65%, 85.1%, and 51.4%), respectively across students from all four academic years.

Other than that, the findings of this study are also in line with Shahira et al (2018), who studied the level of psychological well-being of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) students. The findings found that the depression, anxiety, and stress among UniSZA students were 42.2%, 73.7%, and 34.8% respectively. Findings indicated that students who experienced psychological distress level possessed relatively high percentage for depression, stress, and anxiety. Moreover, the result of this study is parallel with the other study conducted by (Hassan et al., 2022). Data obtained from the 355 Malaysian university students revealed that most of the respondents were sometimes feeling depressed by having negative feelings, and by not being able to become enthusiastic, and feeling anxious where they were close to panic, dryness of their mouth, and feeling stressed where they found themselves getting agitated and difficult to relax.

In a similar vein, the findings of this study are also parallel with the findings in (Saharuddin et al., 2020). The first findings in Saharuddin et al (2020) showed that the score for an anxiety



disorder above normal among student semester 1 to semester 3. Meanwhile the score for depression and general anxiety were above normal among students in semester 4 until semester 7. The second findings were based on financial support. The student who had been sponsored indicated that the general anxiety score was above normal. On the other hands, the self-support students had normal level of depression and none scored for general anxiety.

A stressful individual tends to also experience anxiety at the same time, and if excessively it will lead to depression. In Malaysia, the majority of university students are likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression due to an examination. This is supported by Syahira et al (2018); Fauzi et al (2021), where they pointed out that most of the mental health issues of the university students stem from high level of expectation on their academic achievement and performance. When the target to get excellent grades in the examination is too high and unreachable, automatically this will lead to stress and anxiety. At the same time, most of the previous studies on mental health were conducted among public university students. Compared to their counterparts in private universities, public university students are expected to work harder and be more competitive, therefore leading to them feeling stressed (Bore et al., 2016).

Other than that, university students were also reported to be stressed out due to assignments (Syahira et al., 2018). They experience a high level of stress and stress-related illness as a result of heavy course workload, limited leisure time, lack of access to learning materials, and regular assessments (Siraj et al., 2014; Fauzi et., 2021). Each task assigned needs to be complete within the time frame. Those who are unable to submit by the given schedule, will then feel stressed and anxious. Meanwhile Husin et al (2022), who conducted a mental health study across all universities nationwide consisting of 157 respondents, came to a result that was contradictory, compared to Syahira et al (2018) where the former indicated that both lifestyle and family issues contribute most towards the poor mental health state among university students.

According to Hussin et al (2022), family issues are the main contributor to the respondents' mental wellbeing. For university students, family support plays an important role in helping them to increase their mental capability and their academic progress (Hussin et al., 2022). For students who come from problematic families, they will emerge as having a weak mental health. Even without a good social support from the family, they will feel lonely and further contribute to depression, especially for those who live far from their families (Husin et al., 2022). Consistent with Alsubaie et al (2019), it indicates that one of the main factors that leads to depressive symptoms was the lack of social support and it is the most significant determinant in the psychological well-being of individuals. Their study also proves that individuals' psychological well-being is significantly increased when their family provides better social support.

From the research findings in Saharuddin et al (2020), the authors found that the majority of the students had scores above normal for anxiety disorders from semester 1 until semester 3. The transition phase from high schools to universities can be challenging to some students who are unable to cope with new and unfamiliar education systems as well as lifestyle changes (Syahira et al., 2018). Additionally, the results in Saharuddin et al (2020) also show that there exists a significant relationship between the financial supports including the

monthly expenditure, and the level of mental health of the university students. The sponsored students indicated the highest score of anxiety disorder as compared to self-sponsored students (Saharuddin et al., 2020). Based on the result, it shows that the sponsored student should maintain excellent results to enable their sponsorship to continue every semester. Due to this, they need to put an extra effort to ensure that they can fulfill the sponsorship's requirements especially concerning their academic performance. Understandably, these requirements have made them stressed and anxious.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings in this study, there were a few recommendations that will be proposed in the effort to curb this issue. First of all, the students have faced relatively high depression, stresses and anxiety due to academic pressures such as in the form of assignments, examinations, final year project, and facilities. Therefore, the universities need to play a proactive role in increasing their students' level of mental health with various approaches that are more practical. One of them is by empowering the counseling service as a psychological support platform to help those in need, as stated in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020 (RMK-11, 2015).

Nowadays, counselling had has been acknowledged as an important service in promoting better mental health among the general population (Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Sun & Su, 2020). Numerous studies reported on the benefits of counseling as a mental health service in various settings and situations (Pheng et al., 2019). There are various approaches and techniques in counselling that can be used to help university students face their problems and help them to adapt to the challenges that surface in the university life.

Next, facilities that are too old and lag behind can disrupt the process of the university students completing their assignments or tasks. This can become the crux of the students' stress. Thus, universities should consider providing adequate facilities and resources to support their students in completing their tasks. Other than that, crisis intervention programs need to be established in the university in the effort to give support and care for the mental health of the students (Saharuddin et al., 2020).

One of the intervention efforts is the mentoring programs that have been initiated in some universities to help students to face an unfamiliar education system, specifically for first-year university students. Last but not least, the parents need to take some responsibilities toward university students' mental health by playing their roles, whereas the students need to have the accountability in choosing a healthy lifestyle although they are facing multiple issues and challenges (Husin et al., 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, the current study shows that the majority of university students experience moderate to high level of anxiety and depression, and low to moderate loss of behavioral or emotional control, which are the symptoms of mental health disorders. The findings emphasize the immediate need for the university to provide psychological and psychosocial supports to this population such as counselling as well as intervention programs that they deem appropriate. Apart from that, parents and the students themselves have to play their respective role in ensuring that the mental health issues can be addressed so that the number of students at the university suffering from mental issues can be reduced, and the mental



health level can be optimized. Last but not least, this study can hopefully provide useful insights to relevant parties, in the battle of addressing mental health issues comprehensively.

### Corresponding Author

Suhaili Arifin

Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Development, University Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia

Email: suhaili@umt.edu.my

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