

Heavy price of education

Students struggle with expectations, finances and uncertain futures

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PETALING JAYA: Constant pressure to succeed and outdo their peers, and concerns whether their degrees will land them suitable jobs are causing many university students to suffer from stress and burnout.

Some of them also cited financial constraints, particularly those in private institutions having to take out loans for tertiary education.

Compared to the days of their parents, these students said the pressure of the job market is more intense now.

“Although there was stress in the past, the combination and intensity of factors in the present day make things far worse.

“Financial strain, academic overload and uncertain job prospects create a stressful circle for students,” said 21-year-old Dhanika Nagarajan from Desa Petaling, who is pursuing a degree in English studies.

A Universiti Putra Malaysia study among 1,211 students from public and private higher educational institutions in 2021 found 60.5% of them reporting symptoms of anxiety, while 45.6% were depressed and 40% stressed.

The study found that students at public institutions were less likely to experience depressive symptoms than their peers at private institutions.

It also found that students at private institutions faced significant psychological distress, attributed to factors such as online classes, high tuition fees and extended semesters which incurred additional fees.

Nurul Adlin Nor Mohd Fauzi, who is pursuing a degree in sports management, said the competi-



Under pressure: A Universiti Putra Malaysia study among 1,211 students from public and private higher educational institutions in 2021 found 60.5% of them reporting symptoms of anxiety, while 45.6% were depressed and 40% stressed. — AZLINA ABDULLAH/The Star

tive labour market is her main worry.

“Concerns about the future and the relevance of their degrees are common among students who fear that they will not be able to find jobs in their field of study.

“Graduates typically take low-paying, part-time or unrelated jobs due to skills and job demands that do not match, causing them to become frustrated,” she said, adding that the problem was compounded if they had loans to repay.

In a 2024 paper, think-tank Khazanah Research Institute

found that about one-third of graduates worked in jobs that did not align with their qualifications or fields of study.

Its researchers said alongside youth unemployment, underemployment demanded attention as it impacted long-term career prospects.

Student Fathin Nur Nabila Md Zin said her peers were under immense pressure while battling anxiety, stress and burnout silently.

She said many were overwhelmed trying to balance academic pressure, financial bur-

dens and personal responsibilities.

Psychology student Dhurkkahsri Pushpa Lingam, 22, from Kuala Selangor, shared that academic stress was also caused by modern syllabus which was “heavily loaded”.

Mass communication student Muhammad Adam Ariff Ramli, 21, from Seremban, highlighted the fear of missing out among university students, who constantly compared themselves with peers.

“This can slowly affect the mental state with anxiety building up,” he said.