

Mental Health and Motivation Level among Higher Education Students

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the level of mental health and motivation among students of Institutes of Higher Education in Malaysia. This study was carried out quantitatively through a qualitative method with a case study design to identify the level of mental health and motivation of the study respondents consisting of five students at the Institute of Higher Education who were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The location of the study was conducted at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). The results of this study have successfully found that the factors that affect mental health have three main themes, which are factors that affect mental health, the level of self-motivation and the support system. This study is expected to help various parties to overcome mental health problems among students in Higher Education Institute which are more challenging. This study has implications for the services provided by counselling providers in Higher education Institutions to understand the mental health of students, especially students in Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mental Health; Motivation; Higher Education Students

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have revealed that a significant number of Malaysians, especially students in Institutes of higher education have poor mental health. There were so many factors that contributed towards the issues. Their negative attitudes and lack of proper understanding towards mental health may be the main factor of poor mental health. (Hanafiah & Van Bortel 2015; Yeap & Low 2009).

In fact, some studies have reported that the number of students who suffer from depression, anxiety and stress have increased. (Wong, et al., 2023). This module was developed to explore the mental health and motivation level among the IPT students in Malaysia. The module was conducted and had a great impact on the students. With the aid of this mental health and motivation module, counsellors can carry out group counselling sessions more easily and with more confidence. This module also helps leadership at various

levels to disseminate information and awareness of psychological well-being to IPT students. What we can all see in the content of this module; it is in accordance with the title and objective that will be delivered.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), mental health refers to an individual's ability to regulate his thoughts, feelings, and actions when he is in various situations and faced with various life conflicts. This also causes good mental health to have an impact on student motivation. Therefore, the level of mental health is very important, and it will cause them to face difficulties in controlling their emotions, cognitive and actions when they are in stressful situations (WHO, 2004). Mental health also affects students' motivation levels and their academic performance. Individuals with a good level of mental health tend to have a high level of motivation and achieve excellent results.

In Malaysia, one out of three people experience mental health issues either consciously or unconsciously (Raaj, 2021). According to the Malaysian Ministry of Health, there is an increase in the number of women suffering from mental health problems (General Health Institute, 2016). This study also found that there has been a double increase in mental health patients compared to a decade ago due to several factors. Among the main factors identified are financial burden, failure to meet expectations and pressure from the environment.

However, most of the previous studies were conducted abroad (Mat Wajar, et al., 2022). Many studies show that there is a significant number of Malaysian students who have a low level of mental health. The rate of Malaysian students suffering from mental health problems has doubled compared to before 10% in 2011 to 20% in 2016 (Hezmi 2018). Many studies and reports show serious mental health problems involving IPT students. Mental health among students at Institutes of Higher Education is becoming increasingly worrisome. Mental health is as important as physical health because it involves aspects of behavioural, emotional and spiritual well-being in an individual that affects the well-being of life and a person's relationship with others.

Statistics show an increase in mental health problems among students in Malaysia in recent years. This is so because students tend to experience depression and are also stressed by high family expectations in academic achievement. This is proven by a study conducted by Shamsuddin et al. (2013) on university students around the Klang Valley. Therefore, the issue of mental health problems among young people in Malaysia needs to be taken seriously and given attention. Based on the issues discussed there is a need to highlight the concept of a mechanism to deal with mental health problems.

Therefore, there is a need to study the level of mental health and motivation of university students and explore aspects of motivation. This study is expected to provide an insight to the IPT about the situation of mental health and motivation among students and further formulate an intervention program to improve the level of mental health and motivation of students. The results of the study are also expected to increase students' awareness of the importance of maintaining mental health and motivation in helping them to remain enthusiastic throughout their studies and be able to improve their academic achievements.

Following that, the objectives of this study were to: (1) explore the mental health status; (2) explore students' motivation level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Health

According to WHO (2001), mental health refers to an individual's ability to regulate his thoughts, feelings, and actions when he is in various situations and faced with various life conflicts. Eddington & Shuman (2005) stated that happiness in life can be defined as a person's interpretation of the quality of his life from the cognitive (relationship of achievement, environment, finances, health) and affective (mood and emotions) aspects.

Many past studies prove that there is a relationship between mental health and happiness in life. This is proven through a study who stated that youth who have a good level of mental health tend to feel happy with their lives (Cavioni, et al., 2021). A Study also found that there is a link between the mental health students and also the level of academic performance (Muhammed Ganesan & Azman, 2021; Md Yasin, & Dzulkifli, 2011).

Motivation

Motivation comes from the word 'motive' which means need, desire, desire or drive in an individual. Bernard (1965) stated motivation as a driving force that involves the process of generating, maintaining, and controlling an individual's interest towards achieving a goal or success.

In the internal context, motivation also means a process that acts as a drive or need or changes the situation in ourselves or the environment. According to Reeve (2012), when a person takes advantage of this energy source, it will cause the motivation to drive and the necessary direction to engage with the environment. Motivation forms energy, direction, persistence, and equanimity as well as intention (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and motivation occurs because individuals feel there is a goal for them to change actions.

Depression

Depression (major depressive disorder) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects the way you feel, the way you think, and the way you act. It is a treatable illness and depression can cause feelings of sadness and/or loss of interest in favourite activities (Cheung & Dewa, 2006). It can lead to various emotional, psychological and social problems and can reduce a person's ability to socialize and function in life. In addition, according to the National Institute of Health, it was found that depression is not considered a disease because of its invisible nature and is often poorly understood by the people around.

Depression affects an estimated one in 15 adults (6.7%) and one in six (16.6%) will experience depression at some point in their lives. Depression can occur at any time but on average first appears in the late teens to mid-20s. Women are more likely to experience depression than men. Some studies show that one third of women will experience major depression in their lifetime. There is a high degree of heritability (about 40%) when first-degree relatives (parents/children/siblings) suffer from depression (Kola, et al., 2021).

Anxiety

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) anxiety is defined as "an emotion characterized by tense feelings, worried thoughts and physical changes such as increased blood pressure". We need to help someone distinguish between normal feelings of anxiety and an anxiety disorder that requires medical attention.

Anxiety is a complex response to a real or perceived threat. It involves cognitive, physical and behavioural changes. The duration or degree of feeling anxious may or may not be

proportional to the original trigger or stressor. Physical symptoms may also occur such as increased blood pressure and nausea. These responses also move beyond anxiety-to-anxiety disorders. It can interfere with daily functioning when anxiety reaches a disruptive level (Robinson, et al., 2013). A study by Emily Berger et al. (2022) found that college students faced with academic-related counseling had an impact on their academic achievement. Studies also show that in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 outbreak, psychosocial abilities that have a positive and important impact on student adjustment are emotional intelligence, resilience, and social support. Social support will help increase confidence, a sense of belonging, and shared values (Safree, & Adawiah, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative method with a case study design to identify the level of mental health and motivation of the study respondents consisting of 5 students at a Higher Education Institute (IPT) who were selected using a simple random sampling technique. A total of four group counselling sessions were conducted face-to-face. The study sample was five students at 2 universities in Selangor. The characteristics of the selected respondents are based on their study status and are continuing their studies.

The study sample was representative of the youth population. There were diverse age categories, ethnicity, locality, gender, and background. The 2010 Census Counting Block (BP) was used to determine the sample selection area to ensure that members of the target population would have an equal opportunity to be selected. The advisory services of the Department of Statistics Malaysia were also enlisted to ensure that the samples involved were reflective of the national sampling. As shown in Table 2, there were 51.2% males and 48.8% females in Cohort 1, with more than half of the respondents (63.4%) being Malay, while 15.9% were Chinese, 6.1% Indian, and 14.6% others. Regarding their local background, about 57.4% were from the cities and the rest (42.6%) were from rural areas. The mean age of the participants was 22.8 years (SD = 5.65), with a range of 18 - 30 years. For Cohort 2, there were 51.2% males and 48.8% females. Around 63.4% were Malay, followed by 13.2% Chinese, 7.5% Indian, and 15.9% others. There are 63.3% of respondents from the city and 36.7% from rural areas.

Research Sample/Participants

The study sample was representative of the undergraduate students from Higher Education. There were diverse ethnicities, gender, and education backgrounds. The sample population was voluntary. As shown in Table 2, there were 20% males and 80% females, with more than half of the respondents (80%) being Malay, while 20% were Chinese. Regarding their education background, about 40% were from education courses, 40% engineering courses and the rest (20%) were from Islamic studies courses.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic (n=5)

Demographic	Total (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	1	20
Female	4	80

Year of Study		
1 st	2	40
2 nd	2	40
3 rd	1	20
Faculty		
Education	2	40
Engineering	1	40
Islamic Study	2	20
Race		
Malay	4	80
Chinese	1	20
Religion		
Muslim	4	80
Buddhish	1	20

The participants of this study were chosen voluntarily and purposefully. Each respondent of this study is a student at IPT. Respondent 1 is a 2nd year student in the field of education (Arabic) at UKM. He is an active student in club and association activities. Respondent 2 is a master's degree student in the field of counselling and respondent 3 is a bachelor's student in the field of engineering at UNITEN. Respondent 4 is an Islamic bachelor's degree student who is also Student Representative Council.

Data Collection Method/Instrumentation

Data was collected through an interview method. Interview questions were based on a literature review and reviewed by experts. Open question interview method by using a flexible question structure instrument against the study sample in obtaining accurate information to achieve the objectives of this study (Creswell, 2014). The interview was conducted through a group counselling session.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through a thematic process by examining the transcription of the recordings and identifying themes that arose based on the objectives of the study. The module includes several activities with the theme of self-awareness, SMART goals, self-psychology and mental health and self-motivation. This session is implemented by running a group session. The total number of sessions implemented is four sessions and each session takes 90 minutes.

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Table 2. Module of Mental Health and Motivation of Higher Education Students summary.

Session	Activity	Activity summary
1 st	Self-Love and acceptance	To identify their personality, interest and value. Cultivating the self-love and acceptance.
2 nd	Develop a SMART goal	Help them to have clear, and specific goals. Explore short- and long-term goals.
3 rd	Self-Psychology & Mental Health	Learning self-reliance skills to manage personal well-being and identify significant people (Family, friends and others).
4 th	Self-motivation	Identifying motivation in building career interest and exploring one's potential to become a capable student in motivating oneself.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study found three main themes from the exploration of module-based activities which are factors affecting mental health, sources of motivation and support systems. Three sub themes under factors affecting mental health are high family expectations, financial problems and the burden of assignments and exams. Two sub-themes under the level of self-motivation are realizing one's abilities and being able to contribute to society. Finally, two sub themes under the support system are family support and social relationships.

Theme 1: Factors affecting mental health

i. High family expectations

Students are often the hope of families. They stated that their parents and families put high hopes in seeing changes and developments towards them. This has caused them to experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

"My family has high hopes for me because I am the eldest child and hopes that I can help the family. This causes me to feel stressed."

(R2)

"I feel worried if I can't meet my family's needs."

(R4)

They also stated that professional career parents place high expectations on their children. This makes them have higher expectations of their children to be successful. These high expectations cause students to feel afraid and burdened. There are also parents who decide the future of their children, causing them to follow and continue studies that are not their interest.

"Actually, I didn't want to be a teacher, but my parents told me to continue my studies in the field of education because being a teacher is a stable job. I am interested in becoming a chef."

(R1)

"My parent has professional careers causing them to place high expectations in my career."

(R3)

ii. Financial problems

The high cost of living and an unstable economy put pressure on students. They agree that this financial problem is bothering them. Some students must work part-time to cover the cost of their studies and help their families.

"I need a part-time job to support myself at university."

(R1)

"I often feel ashamed to ask my parents for money."

(R3)

"I couldn't focus on studying because I was thinking about financial problems. My mother does not work because she takes care of my sick grandmother."

(R4)

In addition, students nowadays do not have the skills to manage their finances. They are unable to manage finances and distinguish between needs and wants due to lifestyle. Students tend to follow the latest trends such as buying the latest edition of smartphones or going to exclusive coffee shops. This happens due to exposure on social media and the influence of peers. Therefore, they have spent beyond their means.

"I often buy items that I want but are not important to me."

(R1)

"I often forget where my money has been spent and often suffer from lack of money."

(R2)

"I'm not good at managing finances well."

(R4)

iii. Burden of assignments and examinations

Students are often faced with many assignments. They had to carry out other tasks such as participating in university activities and completing assignments given by lecturers. As a student, it is encouraged to be active in participating in activities at colleges and universities to accumulate merit and gain useful experience. However, sometimes they cannot manage their time well and cause them to feel stressed due to this burden.

"Assignments cause me to have no time to do other activities. I often procrastinate to complete the tasks given."

(R1)

"I sometimes complete assignments on time. But there are times when I will complete it at the last minute."

(R2)

"The lecturer gives a lot of assignments. I don't have time to join the program in college. I'm tired of joining the program, I prefer to rest or play games."

(R3)

"I am able to get involved in college and university activities."

(R4)

Theme 2: The level of self-motivation

i. Realize your own abilities

Mental health is a state of well-being where individuals realize their own abilities.

"I often feel discouraged."

(R1)

"I am aware of my abilities."

(R2)

"I don't know my strengths and weaknesses. When I do the SWOT, I realize my strengths and weaknesses."

(R3)

"I am a confident and productive person. I will strive to achieve my career goals."

(R4)

ii. Able to contribute to society

Mental health is a state of well-being where individuals realize their own abilities.

"I often feel tired and fatigued."

(R1)

"I am able to contribute to society."

(R2)

Theme 3: Support system

i. Support of family and friends

Support from family members or significant others is important for our emotional, psychological and social well-being.

"I lack self-support. My family has a conflict."

(R1)

"I often hide my feelings and do not express my problems to anyone. I am sometimes afraid to express problems."

(R2)

"Before this I never shared my problems with anyone. In this session I was able to express the problems faced and I also realize that the group members also have the same problems."

(R3)

"I often share my problems and pressures I face with my family. They are the people I trust the most and are close to."

(R4)

ii. Social relationships

Communication and mutual support between friends, family, community and society can reduce the strongest level of stress.

"I often isolate myself and only go out to class."

(R1)

"I often socialize and often do activities with friends and family."

(R2)

"I don't like to be involved in activities and I refuse to socialize."

(R3)

"I am a person who has many friends. I also often involve myself in volunteering and community activities."

(R4)

Discussion and Implications

Based on the results of the study, for the first theme, which is factors affecting mental health, includes several subthemes. Among them are high family expectations, financial problems and the burden of assignments and exams. This is supported by Ramli & Sheikh Dawood (2020) although the researcher's study states that the learning aspect is the highest where this study takes place during the pandemic. This study is also supported by Samsudin & Chee Hong (2016) stating that the poorer the level of mental health, the poorer the academic performance of students. The relationship between students' mental health and the impact on academic achievement requires immediate prevention (Emily Berger et al., 2022).

The second theme, which is the level of self-motivation, includes several subthemes, namely realizing one's abilities and being able to contribute to society. In this subtheme, students are highly motivated because they want to achieve excellent academic performance. However, it is difficult for them to get motivated due to the problems they face. Some of them don't know how to deal with the problems they face causing them to be demotivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Previous studies have found that motivation is a key factor in improving mental health and influencing academic achievement (Kotera & Ting, 2021; Velki, 2011). University support for students is very important to ensure their mental health is good throughout their studies (Kirsch, et al., 2014).

The third theme is the support system, which is divided into two, namely the support of family and friends and social relationship. Students who have a strong support system can provide them with high self-motivation. Students are not only able to share problems but can find alternatives to face the problem. As discussed in the session, support systems and social relationships are important in a student's life (Md Yasin, & Dzulkifli, 2011). University students are also prone to mental problems because of various psychosocial changes and stress in dealing with crises. Indirectly, these students experience stress due to excessive expectations on them which are detrimental to their physical and mental health. Depression, anxiety, and stress are problems that are often faced by students, including those in higher education. There are many studies showings that university student achievement can be influenced by anxiety (Seligman & Wuyek 2007) and stress (Md Aris Safree & Mariam Adawiah, 2011).

The implications of the research conducted can enhance efforts to understand the mental health of students, especially students in Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia. Students must ensure that their mental health is in good condition throughout their studies by seeking psychosocial support provided by the university. In addition, it is necessary to build self-resilience to face academic and social challenges (Michael, 2011). Beside that, this module of mental health and motivation can also be used as a guide to counselling practitioners for students facing mental health problems. This study should also be extended to students at the school level as well as colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has successfully identified the level of mental health and motivation of Higher Education students. This study was successfully proved by directly explaining the level of mental health and motivation in the level of academic performance measured through exam results. The findings of this study clearly prove that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) need to take appropriate measures to improve the mental health and motivation of students because these two factors can have an impact on their academic performance. Through this study it was found that mental health and motivation can affect the academic performance of students. Mental health is an important factor in influencing students' lives.

Therefore, this study can further strengthen the findings that the level of mental health has an impact on student motivation. It also provides guidance to HEI and other authorities to effectively provide mental health services to the early teens, especially students. Interventional mental health services and psychosocial services need to be implemented comprehensively, into the community or a specific target population. In addition, this study can also provide guidance to other researchers to conduct specific studies on the relationship between mental health and motivation levels for students in Malaysia and find solutions to control this issue.

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