The Connection Between Mental Health and Well-being Among Polytechnic Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The mental health and well-being of polytechnic students in Malaysia are essential determinants of their academic performance, personal growth, and future career prospects. This study examines the complex relationship between mental health and well-being within this demographic, emphasizing the prevalence of mental health challenges and their impacts on students' quality of life and academic outcomes. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research incorporates quantitative data from a survey of 300 polytechnic students, selected through stratified sampling, along with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with a subset of 20 students. Findings reveal a significant correlation between mental health and well-being, showing that high stress and anxiety levels adversely affect students' overall quality of life and academic success. Additionally, while some students benefit from supportive networks and available institutional resources, many face barriers to accessing mental health support, including stigma, limited awareness, and insufficient services. This research underscores the importance of destigmatizing mental health support, promoting awareness, and enhancing access to resources within polytechnic institutions. Future research is recommended to explore targeted interventions and develop sustainable strategies for maintaining and enhancing mental health and well-being in this educational context.

Keywords: mental health, well-being, academic achievement

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among students globally has drawn significant attention from researchers and policymakers alike. In Malaysia, the situation is particularly alarming among polytechnic students who face unique academic pressures that can adversely affect their mental health.

Background of the Study

Mental health is a critical aspect of overall well-being that influences various life domains, including education, social interactions, and career development. The Malaysian context presents specific challenges as cultural stigmas surrounding mental health often hinder students from seeking help (Kumar & Kaur, 2020). These stigmas are particularly pronounced among youth, including polytechnic students, who are navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This period is marked by increased academic pressures, social adjustments, and the need to meet familial expectations, all of which can exacerbate mental health concerns.

In the polytechnic setting, students often face additional stressors such as adapting to technical coursework and preparing for industry demands. Research indicates that a significant proportion of Malaysian polytechnic students experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, which can impair academic performance and disrupt daily life (Yusoff et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, institutional support systems remain underutilized due to limited awareness and accessibility. This study aims to explore the connection between mental health and well-being among Malaysian polytechnic students, shedding light on their unique struggles and identifying strategies to foster a supportive educational environment.

Objective

The primary objectives of this study are:
  a) To investigate the prevalence of mental health challenges among polytechnic students.
  b) To examine the relationship between mental health and academic performance.
  c) To identify barriers to accessing mental health resources.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses a gap in the existing literature regarding polytechnic students in Malaysia, a demographic often overlooked in mental health research. Understanding their unique challenges can inform policy changes and improve support systems.

For students, this study highlights the importance of mental health awareness and its role in enhancing academic performance, personal development, and overall well-being. By shedding light on common mental health issues and their impact, it aims to empower students with knowledge and encourage them to seek help when needed. This can lead to improved coping mechanisms and better outcomes in both their studies and personal lives.

For institutions, the findings can guide the development of more targeted and effective mental health programs. By identifying specific stressors and challenges faced by polytechnic

students, institutions can implement proactive measures such as counseling services, peer support groups, and stress management workshops. These initiatives can foster a supportive educational environment, reduce dropout rates, and enhance student satisfaction.

For the industry, this study underscores the importance of preparing mentally resilient graduates who can thrive in demanding professional settings. By understanding the mental health challenges faced by polytechnic students, industries can collaborate with educational institutions to support student well-being and ensure that future employees possess not only technical skills but also the emotional stability required for long-term success in the workforce.

Literature Review

This section reviews existing literature on mental health issues among polytechnic students in Malaysia, focusing on factors such as academic stress, financial pressures, social relationships, and access to support services.

Mental Health Challenges

Research indicates that a significant proportion of Malaysian youth experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Kumar & Kaur, 2020). A nationwide study found that approximately 45.6% of participants reported depressive symptoms, while 60.5% experienced anxiety symptoms (National Health & Morbidity Survey, 2021). The transition to higher education often exacerbates these challenges due to increased academic demands.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among Malaysian Youth
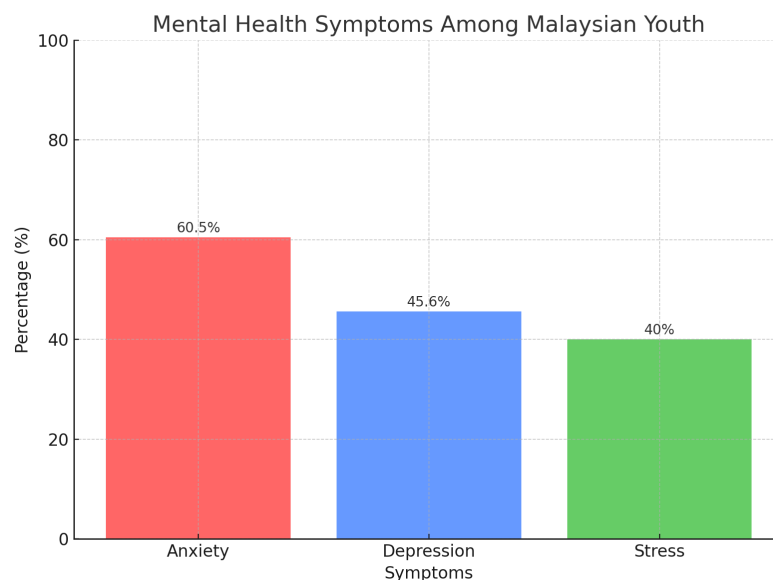
Note: A bar graph showing the percentage of Malaysian youth experiencing anxiety (60.5%), depression (45.6%), and stress (40%).

Impact on Academic Performance

Studies have consistently shown that poor mental health negatively impacts academic performance (Mahmud et al., 2021). Students experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to have lower grades and higher dropout rates. A recent survey indicated that 35% of

college freshmen report symptoms consistent with diagnosable mental health disorders (Donaldson et al., 2023).

Table 1: Correlation Between Mental Health Symptoms and Academic Performance

Mental Health Issue	Correlation with GPA
Anxiety	-0.65
Depression	-0.58
Stress	-0.70

Barriers to Support

Despite the availability of support services in educational institutions, many students do not utilize them due to stigma or lack of awareness (Lee et al., 2019). Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Figure 2: Reasons for Not Seeking Help Among Students
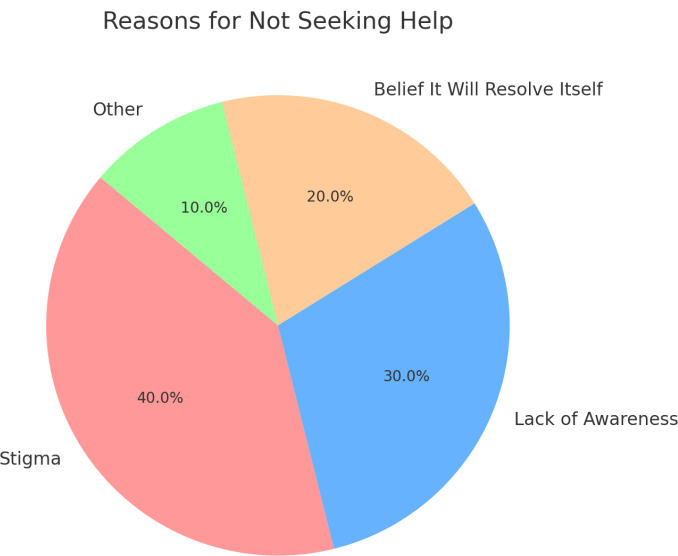
Note: A pie chart illustrating reasons for not seeking help: stigma (40%), lack of awareness (30%), belief that it will resolve itself (20%), other (10%).

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather comprehensive data on the mental health status of polytechnic students.

Participants

A total of 300 polytechnic students were surveyed using stratified sampling methods to ensure representation across different demographics (gender, age groups, year of study).

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through self-administered questionnaires assessing various aspects of mental health and well-being (see Appendix A). The questionnaire included

standardized scales such as the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) for anxiety assessment and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression assessment.

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) are widely used standardized scales designed to assess symptoms of anxiety and depression, respectively. Both tools are validated for use in diverse populations, including Malaysia, making them suitable for understanding mental health challenges in a local context.

The GAD-7 is a seven-item self-reported questionnaire developed to screen and measure the severity of generalized anxiety disorder. Each item assesses symptoms such as excessive worry, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating over the previous two weeks. Respondents rate the frequency of these symptoms on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day), yielding a total score ranging from 0 to 21. Scores categorize anxiety levels as mild, moderate, or severe. In the Malaysian context, studies have demonstrated the reliability of the GAD-7 in identifying anxiety among students, with cultural sensitivity in interpreting the results. Factors such as academic pressure, familial expectations, and financial constraints are frequently linked to heightened anxiety among Malaysian polytechnic students.

The PHQ-9 is a nine-item self-administered tool for screening and diagnosing the severity of depression. It evaluates symptoms such as loss of interest, fatigue, changes in appetite, and suicidal thoughts, based on their frequency over the past two weeks. Each item is rated from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day), producing a total score between 0 and 27. Scores categorize depression levels as minimal, mild, moderate, or severe. In Malaysia, the PHQ-9 is commonly used in research and clinical settings to understand depression trends, including among youth. Its relevance lies in capturing how cultural factors, such as stigma and collectivist values, impact the experience and reporting of depressive symptoms.

Both scales provide robust, quantifiable data on mental health, facilitating cross-cultural comparisons while accommodating Malaysia's multicultural society. Their simplicity and brevity make them ideal for self-administration in academic settings, where large-scale mental health assessments are necessary. By applying these tools, this study aims to highlight the prevalence of anxiety and depression among Malaysian polytechnic students and to inform culturally appropriate interventions to address these mental health concerns.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a subset of 20 participants. These participants were carefully selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of demographics, including age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews focused on exploring participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms concerning mental health challenges.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended to allow participants to share their narratives freely, fostering a deeper understanding of their unique experiences.

To maintain data reliability, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture non-

verbal cues and contextual details. These qualitative insights were used to complement the quantitative data from surveys, providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS) to determine correlations between variables. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify common themes related to mental health experiences.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The survey results indicated that approximately 40% of participants reported experiencing symptoms consistent with anxiety or depression (Figure 3). A significant correlation was found between high stress levels and poor academic performance ($r = -0.65$, $p < .01$).

Figure 3: Prevalence of Mental Health Symptoms Among Polytechnic Students
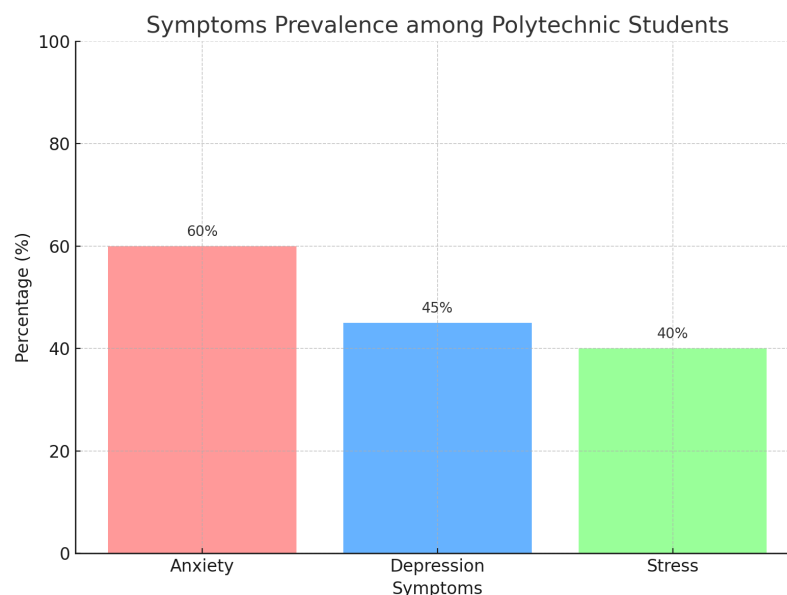
Note: A stacked bar chart displaying percentages for anxiety symptoms (60%), depression symptoms (45%), and stress symptoms (40%).

The quantitative analysis revealed the following key points:
- **Prevalence of Mental Health Symptoms:** Approximately 40% of participants reported symptoms consistent with anxiety or depression.
- **Correlations:** A strong negative correlation was identified between high stress levels and academic performance ($r = -0.65$, $p < .01$), indicating that increased stress adversely impacts students' academic success.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews revealed that many students felt overwhelmed by academic pressures and financial stressors. Participants highlighted the importance of social support but also noted barriers such as stigma when seeking help.

Table 2: Themes From Qualitative Interviews

Theme	Description
Academic Pressure	High expectations leading to stress
Financial Stress	Concerns about tuition fees and living expenses
Social Support	Importance of friends and family for emotional support
Stigma	Reluctance to seek help due to fear of judgment

The interviews underscored the complex interplay between academic and financial pressures, social support systems, and the cultural stigma surrounding mental health. Participants often expressed a desire for greater mental health awareness and resources within their academic institutions.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative survey results with qualitative interview insights provides a comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape among polytechnic students in Malaysia.

Quantitative and qualitative data collectively demonstrate that mental health challenges are prevalent among polytechnic students. While statistical analysis quantified the impact of stress on academic performance, thematic insights revealed deeper personal and systemic barriers to mental health, such as stigma and financial concerns. Both datasets point to the urgent need for targeted interventions that address academic expectations, financial burdens, and mental health stigma.

Discussion

Implications for Policy

To enhance student well-being, educational institutions must prioritize implementing policies that actively promote mental health awareness and ensure accessible support services. One critical step involves providing training programs for faculty and staff to help them recognize signs of distress among students and respond effectively. Faculty members, as primary points of contact for students, can play a pivotal role in creating a supportive environment when equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Additionally, institutions should invest in awareness campaigns designed to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues. These campaigns could include workshops, seminars, and social media initiatives that educate students about the importance of seeking help and foster an inclusive culture where discussing mental health is normalized.

Furthermore, the allocation of additional resources toward counseling services within polytechnics is essential. Increasing the availability of trained mental health professionals, ensuring confidentiality, and reducing wait times for appointments are crucial measures that can encourage more students to seek support. By prioritizing these initiatives, educational institutions can create an environment where students feel supported, enabling them to thrive academically and emotionally.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should focus on interventions specifically designed to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues among students. Longitudinal research examining changes in student mental health over time could provide insights into evolving needs and inform policy adjustments. Additionally, exploring the impact of peer support programs on student well-being would offer valuable data on the effectiveness of peer-led initiatives. Comparative studies between different educational settings, such as universities and polytechnics, could also shed light on context-specific challenges and solutions, enhancing overall student support systems.

Conclusion

This research highlights the urgent need for improved mental health support systems within polytechnic institutions in Malaysia. Addressing these challenges is vital for fostering a healthier student population capable of achieving their full potential academically and personally.

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