



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**TOPIC: ACADEMIC STRESS AND THE STUDENTS MENTAL
HEALTH**

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ACADEMIC STRESS AND THE STUDENTS MENTAL HEALTH

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This project is submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

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ABSTRACT

Majority of students tend to experience academic stress which is emotional distress due to their frustrations of potential academic failure and a high level of stress may affect the student's mental health. This research is aimed to investigate the relationship of academic stress and students' mental health at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. A quantitative research method was used to collect and analyse the data from a sample size of 150 Unimas students, 75 male and female students, respectively. The instruments used are the Perception of Academic Stress Scale (PASS) and Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). The results show that there is a weak positive correlation between academic stress and mental health. Also, there is a significant gender difference of academic stress and mental health between male and female students. Thus, students should understand academic stress and mental health better, to promote overall health by taking important measures to cope and to live a healthier lifestyle.

ABSTRAK

Majoriti pelajar cenderung mengalami tekanan akademik yang merupakan tekanan emosi kerana kekecewaan mereka terhadap kegagalan akademik yang berpotensi dan tahap tekanan yang tinggi boleh menjejaskan kesihatan mental pelajar. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat tekanan akademik dan kesihatan mental pelajar di Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas). Kaedah penyelidikan kuantitatif digunakan untuk mengumpul dan menganalisis data daripada saiz sampel 150 pelajar Unimas, iaitu 75 pelajar lelaki dan perempuan masing-masing. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah “Perception of Academic Stress Scale” (PASS) and “Depression Anxiety Stress Scale” (DASS-21). Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa terdapat korelasi positif yang lemah antara tekanan akademik dan kesihatan mental. Terdapat juga, perbezaan jantina yang signifikan dari tekanan akademik dan kesihatan mental antara pelajar lelaki dan perempuan. Justeru, pelajar wajarlah memahami tentang tekanan akademik dan kesihatan mental dengan lebih baik, untuk mempromosikan kesihatan secara keseluruhan dengan mengambil langkah-langkah penting untuk mengatasi dan menjalani gaya hidup yang lebih sihat.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The research topic of this study is academic stress and the students mental health. This chapter serve as a brief introduction and overview about this researchThe background of study, problem statement, research objectives, questions, hypothesis, the conceptual framework, the significance of the study, the definition of terms, as well as the summary included in this chapter was discussed.

1.1 Background of Study

Stress is an unavoidable natural response to a human body and can be faced by many individuals, irrespective of their age, race, religion, profession, background, or environment (Esia-Donkoh & Yelk pieri, 2011). Stress is also the worry or pressure faced by students due to school and education (Suresh, 2015). University students face many challenges to succeed and fulfil various obligations, such as schoolwork, examinations, extracurricular activities, assignments, presentations, and catching on deadlines. Academic pressure, adapting to an unfamiliar setting, fear of failing, and low self-esteem leads to higher dissatisfaction for university students (Pariat, Rynjah, & Kharjan, 2014). These stressors were the various sources of academic stress that may affect the students' academic performances due to their busy schedules and lifestyle in university. It is specifically tougher for students that are staying far away from their homes (Suresh, 2015).

As a result, stress has become one of the major health problems and has a high percentage of the students facing stress which affects their mental health, leading to students facing anxiety and depression. Mental health is the basis of the well-being and efficient function of a person (World Health Organization, 2020). It influences the way we think, feel, and act, as well as the way we cope with stress, interact with people, and make decision. Every human has mental health, and it is vital at every stage of life. According to the Institute for Public Health (2015), it was found that one over three Malaysians are dealing with mental illnesses due to the stress faced as a university student. There was also a high increase in suicide levels. Referring to the five-year statistics from the Ministry of Health Malaysia's Health Informatics Center (2010-2014), 338 deaths in the hospitals were due to suicide attempts. Thus, this research was conducted to help in sharing knowledge and raising awareness among students about academic stress and mental health.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although they are researchers that have done the study of correlation between academic stress and mental health before, the existing literature on this dimension remained unclear. After high school years, there are many students that attend colleges or universities who have lived through various hardships and tough times, such as lack of social support from their family, financial difficulty, and feeling lonely (Paulynice, 2019). Due to this, university students may have high rates of experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, eating disorder, or suicidal thoughts, which may affect their overall health in daily life.

Most students that faced stress had a high level of poor self-esteem, and nearly 50% of the students experienced a greater level of depression (Baste & Gadkari, 2014). Previous studies revealed that a greater level of stress is related to the worsening of academic performance (Sohail, 2013). As a result, the students mental health has recently become an increasing concern over the years because many students might face a high level of stress due to busy university schedules and the current ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has caused a huge impact on the students. These vital concerns should be discussed for students to critically think and prevent them from worsening (Hafis, 2018). Stress can be developed among students due to the constant phase of their hectic lifestyle. Thus, it is crucial to spread awareness about the relationship between academic stress and the students mental health for students to find an effective measure to learn to cope with their mental distress in daily life.

1.3 Research Objectives (RO)

RO1: To investigate the relationship between academic stress and the students mental health.

RO2: To identify the gender differences in academic stress and the students mental health.

1.4 Research Questions (RQ)

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between academic stress and the student's mental health?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in academic stress and mental health between male and female students?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant relationship between academic stress and the students mental health.

H2: There is a significant difference in academic stress and mental health between male and female students.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

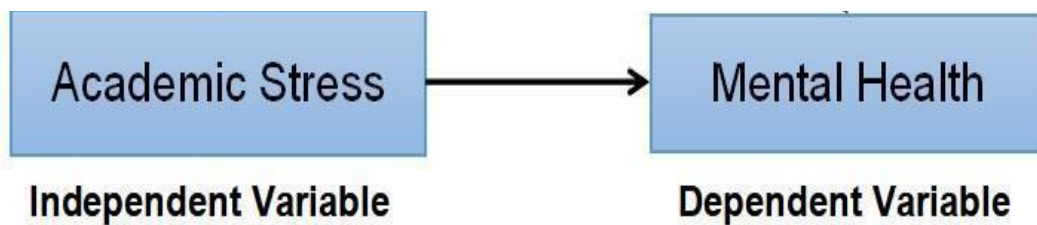


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

The Independent Variable (IV) is the academic stress and the Dependent variable (DV) is the UNIMAS students mental health. The research aims to investigate the relationship between academic stress and the mental health of UNIMAS students .

1.7 Significance of Study

This study is conducted to help raise or spread awareness to students, lecturers, and parents about the importance of academic stress and mental health. The results of this study will be a huge help to the students, lecturers, and parents in several ways. It will surely benefit the students to gain knowledge and understand better the factors of stress and how stress affects their mental health. So, the students are able to take precautions, know the

coping strategies to cope with stress and mental health more efficiently, to prevent it from worsening in the future. Besides, lecturers can determine the good and bad effects of stress on their academic performance and guidance counselling. Through this, the students can share their worries or concerns to relieve their stress. Also, parents can identify the stress levels of their children and know the measures to help lessen the stress or mental health issues. Thus, students are able to live a healthier lifestyle and learn how to cope with stressful events in their daily life better with this awareness.

1.8 Definition of Terms

1.8.1 Academic Stress

Conceptual Definition: According to Dr. Suresh (2015), the definition of academic stress is the worry or pressure experienced by students due to school and education. When getting a degree or education, there may be a heavy burden, such as studying, homework, examinations, experiments, and assignments. Due to a hectic school schedule, students are under stress to complete all of their assignments, manage their time well, and enroll in extracurricular activities.

Operational Definition: The symptoms of academic stress can be measured through scores from the PASS questionnaire created by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015). It includes 18 questions with a 5-point score scale of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. The higher the score of PASS, the greater the level of stress faced by the individual.

1.8.2 Mental health

Conceptual Definition: According to the World Health Organization (2020), mental health is the basis of the well-being and efficient function of a person. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It influences our thinking, emotions, and actions, as well as the way we cope with stress, interact with people, and make decisions. Every human has mental health and it is vital at each phase of life.

Operational Definition: The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) created by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) is a self-report assessment that is reliable to measure the three axes of mental health, including depression, anxiety, and stress that consists of 21-items. Students were required to grade the items on a scale from 0 (Never) to 3 (Almost always) based on their feelings over the past week. Scores on each axes will identify the cut-off scores of the severity labels of their symptoms such as normal, mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe. The higher the DASS-21 score, the symptoms of a person will be extremely severe.

1.8.3 Gender

Conceptual Definition: Gender produces male and female identities culturally, instead of biological distinctions between men and women (Aslan, 2009). Gender can be a determining factor in our mental health.

Operational Definition: In the initial part of the survey, students were needed to fill in the demographic information, such as their gender.

1.9 Summary

To summarise, the research background, the problem statement, research objectives, and research question were discussed and stated as above relating to the study of academic stress and mental health. Also, the research hypothesis, the conceptual framework, the significance of study, and the definition of terms has been shared.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In Chapter Two, the relevant literature, theories related, the previous findings about the relation of academic stress and the students mental health was reviewed and discussed. The improvement of the recent studies was also emphasised in this chapter.

2.1 Academic Stress

2.1.1 Background of Academic Stress

According to Mental Health Foundation (2021), academic stress is defined as the feeling of frustration and unable to cope with emotional distress due to academic challenges. Stress is a mental condition that occurs in response on a person's interaction with the environment and is activated by the presence of a distressing situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A stressor is something that affects one's mentality due to environmental, biological, and social factors. Academic stress is a major factor of student stress, involving mental distress due to academic challenges or potential academic failure (Magill, Flack, Garcia, & Edwards, 2017). It may appear at any moment in the student's educational life.

Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) stated that university lifestyles such as assignments, examinations, results, pack schedules of classes, desire to perform well in studies, poor time management, and peer pressure are the main sources of academic stress. It is related to the decline of our health, dietary, addictions, and hygiene, which affects the quality of life.

Students face academic stress at certain times each semester due to the preparation for examinations, competitiveness among other students, and a vast amount of subjects to study in a short period (Rawson, Bloomer, & Kendall, 1999). There are four parts of academic stress. Firstly, academic frustration is a phase in which academic goals cause harm. The second type of conflict is academic conflict, which occurs when two or more crucially compatible respondents' academic goals collide. Thirdly, academic pressure occurs to achieve academic goals and when a student is under time constraints. Lastly, academic anxiety occurs when academic goals trigger fear of failure. Thus, academic stress can severely affect achievement because academics, environment, extra-curricular activities, and parental pressure are crucial sources that affect the academic performance of students in university and also contribute to major mental health hazards (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996).

Moreover, teachers expect students to finish their tasks on time, but students may neglect the time taken to finish reading, submit assignments, and meet deadlines. Academic stress in students has been studied since before and stressors are identified, including having too many assignments, competition with classmates, fear of failing, financial issues (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003), poor semester plan, bad ties with classmates, lecturer's, family or personal issues at home. According to Erkutlu and Chafra (2006), when such events occur, the student becomes disorganised and unable to cope, arising in mental health issues. The pressure to do well in examinations or tests, as well as the time constraints, make the learning very challenging (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2006). An extreme level of distress can lead to potential risks of having suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and depression.

Mckean, Misra, West, and Tony (2000) stated that stressful event does not cause anxiety or depression, by itself; rather, stress is caused by the interaction of stress factors and the individual's view and response to these stress factors. When stress turns to an extreme state, it will harm students physically and mentally. The coping measures for student stress are by planning a daily schedule or managing time wisely, having social support from their friends or family, proactive reevaluation, doing meditation, and exercising (Misra & McKean, 2000). This is likely to reflect on social interactions both in and out of the university, which may have an impact on the students life in terms of dedication to achieve their aims (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003).

2.1.2 Theory Related Academic Stress

2.1.2.1 Transactional Model of Stress

The Transactional Model of Stress founded by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is a model of the psychological process engaged in stress. A person's cognitive understanding of possibly stressful situations is perceived as stress. It is proposed that stress is a relationship between environmental pressures and the ability to adapt to them, rather than external stimuli or a psychological reaction. These are two crucial processes that reflect the action of psychological appraisal and coping. The psychological appraisal is defined as a person's continuous assessment and the resources required to deal with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, when people are confronted with a stressful event, it determines the level of possible threat and resources needed to deal with the threat.