

A qualitative study on the mental and emotional well-being of first-year university students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mental and emotional challenges faced by first-year university students in Malaysia to identify key factors influencing their adjustment to university life. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 first- and second-year students selected through purposive sampling. Conducting this research in Malaysia is essential, as limited studies have examined how local students experience and manage the emotional and mental health challenges associated with the transition to university life. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: i) declining mental health marked by heightened anxiety and depression; ii) fluctuating self-esteem due to academic pressures and newfound independence; iii) financial stress exacerbating emotional distress; and iv) the role of therapy and professional help in managing mental health concerns. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on student mental health by offering insights into the psychological and emotional dimensions of university transition. The study provides important implications for policy and institutional practice, underscoring the need for comprehensive, student-centered support systems such as structured mental health programs, peer mentoring, and financial literacy workshops. Addressing these factors can enhance students' well-being, academic performance, and retention. Despite its rich qualitative insights, the small sample size and self-reported data highlight the need for future mixed-method and longitudinal research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to university marks a pivotal phase in young adults' lives, especially for first-year students who must adapt to new academic, social, and personal challenges. This period often introduces a variety of stressors, including academic pressures, financial burdens, and social isolation, all of which can significantly affect mental health and emotional well-being [1], [2]. The ability to regulate emotions, establish social connections, and maintain psychological resilience plays a crucial role in how well students adapt to these new demands. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are particularly prevalent during this transition, often exacerbated by low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness [3]–[5]. Studies show that over 55% of first-year students report mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, negatively impacting their overall well-being [2], [6].

Emotional well-being is the capacity to manage emotions, navigate challenges, and maintain balance in life, with self-esteem—an essential aspect—representing how one perceives their value and self-worth. It serves as a sociometer, reflecting an individual's perceived value within a social context and influencing their emotional resilience and psychological adjustment [7]. Higher self-esteem can buffer students against stress and improve their capacity to cope with academic and social demands [8]. Conversely, low self-esteem is often linked to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety, which can significantly impair students' emotional well-being and adaptation to university life [9], [10]. Research has shown that students with positive mental health tend to maintain a balance of positive emotions, highlighting the relationship between mental health and self-esteem during this period [9].

In Malaysia, the challenges faced by first-year university students are compounded by unique cultural and systemic factors. Studies indicate that Malaysian students report higher mental health issues compared to their international counterparts, such as those in the UK, partly due to lower levels of self-compassion and resilience [4]. Anxiety remains the most common mental health disorder among Malaysian students, followed by depression and stress, with financial pressures further impacting mental health [2], [11]–[13]. Additionally, low self-esteem levels among Malaysian first-year students have been observed, impacting their mental health and emotional well-being as they adjust to institutional demands [14]–[16]. However, there is limited empirical research examining how Malaysian first-year students cope with these challenges, particularly regarding self-esteem development, longitudinal patterns of mental health, and cross-cultural comparisons. This underscores the importance of institutional efforts to provide effective coping and support mechanisms. To manage these challenges, counselling and support services are critical in helping Malaysian students cope with the stressors of university life [16].

Significantly, research has highlighted the adverse effects of academic pressure on mental health, as first-year students often feel overwhelmed by increased academic demands [1]. Social isolation and a sense of loneliness are also prevalent, both of which are major predictors of mental health issues [2]. Studies suggest that as students navigate these pressures, self-esteem serves as a positive antecedent of well-being; thus, fostering higher self-esteem could reduce stress and enhance students' emotional well-being [7], [8]. However, the stigma surrounding mental health support can further discourage students from seeking help, contributing to a cycle of emotional distress [4].

This study provides a novel contribution by adopting a qualitative, student-centered approach to explore the mental and emotional well-being of Malaysian first-year university students during their transition to university life. While prior research has predominantly employed quantitative methods or focused on international contexts, this study offers rich, contextualized insights through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. Engaging with students captures immediate and reflective perspectives on the challenges faced during this university transitional period. This approach addresses a critical gap in Malaysian higher education literature and contributes practical implications for culturally responsive support initiatives. Framed by the guiding research question that focuses on how first-year university students experience mental and emotional well-being during their transition to university life, this study aims to inform the development of tailored mental health and emotional support systems for first-year students in Malaysia.

2. METHOD

2.1. Approach to data collection and participants

This study utilized qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured interviews to investigate the mental health and emotional challenges faced by Malaysian first-year university students during their transition to university life. Purposive sampling, known for its effectiveness in selecting participants who can provide rich, relevant information [17], was used to recruit 15 first- and second-year students reflecting on their first-year experiences. These participants were targeted because they were either currently undergoing or had recently undergone the transition period, enabling them to provide first-hand and reflective insights into the psychological and emotional adjustments required during this critical phase. This selection ensured that participants could meaningfully describe the challenges, coping strategies, and support systems influencing their mental health and emotional well-being. In qualitative research, a sample size of approximately 15 participants is generally considered adequate [18], [19]. Participants were recruited through direct outreach, including contacting university students and their friends by phone. Those who agreed and provided informed consent were included in the study, with interviews conducted in their preferred locations, such as coffee shops or online through video calls. The flexible, semi-structured interview format allowed for the exploration of key topics, including questions such as "How has your mental and emotional well-being been since starting university?" Probing questions encouraged further discussion and in-depth understanding. All interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed and anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

2.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke [20], was used to analyze the data. The process involved six steps: i) familiarization; ii) coding; iii) theme generation; iv) reviewing themes; v) defining and naming themes; and vi) writing up. In this study, the interview data were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times during the familiarization phase to ensure deep engagement with the data. Coding was conducted manually, where key text segments were identified and tagged. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes during the theme generation phase. The preliminary themes were subsequently reviewed to ensure that they accurately represented the data and were clearly distinguishable from one another. Each finalized theme was then carefully defined and given a concise, descriptive name to capture its core meaning. Finally, in the writing-up phase, the themes were synthesized and illustrated with participant quotations to construct a coherent narrative of students' experiences and adjustments to university life. This systematic approach provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and adjustments faced by students.

Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted, where colleagues reviewed the coding and theme generation process to provide feedback and ensure consistency. This collaborative review served as a form of verification, helping to minimize researcher bias and enhance the credibility of the findings. The manual coding process, supported by peer debriefing, helped validate the results and enhance the rigor of the analysis despite the study's single-source design.

3. RESULTS

The analysis identifies four themes for the mental and emotional well-being of first-year university students in Malaysia. These themes are mental health decline, self-esteem, financial stress, and therapy and professional help. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

3.1. Mental health decline

Most of the students reported experiencing a decline in their mental health since starting university, with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. Factors include academic stress, loneliness, and separation from family. For example, student B reported several symptoms:

"It's my first time living away from my family, and everything at university feels new and overwhelming. I really struggle with the academic stress here. Plus, I find it hard to connect with others because the culture is so different from mine. Since I arrived, my mental health has taken a hit—I've been dealing with anxiety, depression, and insomnia."

3.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem reflects the emotional state of the individual. Some students mentioned fluctuations in self-esteem. Academic challenges, failure, or emotional stress lower self-esteem, while others feel that independence has improved it. Student C stated:

"Being independent at university made my self-esteem stronger. Due to academic pressure, my mental health is unstable, but my strong self-esteem helped me survive my first-year journey."

3.3. Financial stress

Some students reported that their financial problems are a significant factor affecting their mental and emotional well-being. For instance, student M highlighted:

"Managing my finances always stresses me out since I have to plan and budget the pocket money my family gives me. It's tough to deal with these situations."

3.4. Therapy and professional help

Some students have turned to therapy or medical help to manage mental health challenges due to the pressures of university life. For them, therapy, often combined with medication, has proven to be an effective way to relieve stress and enhance their mental well-being. Student A reported:

"University life is demanding, and it's starting to affect my mental health. To cope with it, I reached out for professional help. With therapy and medication, I've been able to manage my stress and feel better overall."

4. DISCUSSION

The mental and emotional well-being of students often declines during their first-year. Many students report heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks due to academic stress, loneliness, and separation from their families. The transition to a new environment, coupled with a heavy academic workload, significantly contributes to these struggles. Increased academic demands are a primary cause of stress and anxiety in first-year students [1]. Studies indicate that 35-55% of students experience high levels of psychological distress during this transition period, highlighting the widespread nature of the issue [21]. Research has shown significant increases in mental health symptoms among first-year students, particularly in anxiety and depression levels before and after the COVID-19 pandemic [22]. The transition to university life exposes students to various stressors, including academic pressures, independent decision-making, and a lack of established support networks, all of which contribute to psychological distress [23]. While some students adjust over time, mental health struggles often persist beyond the first-year [23]. Furthermore, research involving first-year university students has demonstrated that poor mental health, particularly depression, predicts reduced degree commitment and lower cumulative grade point average (GPA) [24]. These findings underscore the negative impact of mental health issues on both academic performance and students' dedication to completing their degrees, emphasizing the importance of early interventions [24].

Regarding self-esteem, the data show a complex pattern. While some students experience a decline in self-confidence due to academic challenges and emotional stress, others report an increase in self-esteem due to newfound independence. Changes in self-esteem during the first-year of university indicate that achievement goals play a role in this developmental process [25]. Studies suggest that self-esteem fluctuations are common during major life transitions and are significantly impacted by social problem-solving skills and peer relationships [3]. New social environments can intensify feelings of loneliness and inferiority, further lowering self-esteem [3]. Additionally, research on first-year students in higher education institutions in the Philippines found a positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, indicating that higher self-esteem is associated with better academic performance [26].

Financial stress is another significant contributor to students' emotional strain. Many students struggle with financial management, which exacerbates anxiety and depression. The financial burden on students is increasing due to rising tuition costs, decreasing grants, and institutional spending shifts, which ultimately shift more financial responsibility onto students [27]. Research has demonstrated a clear correlation between financial insecurity and psychological distress, reinforcing the need for financial literacy programs [28].

For those experiencing severe mental health challenges, seeking professional help, such as counseling or therapy, becomes a necessary coping strategy. Therapy, often combined with medication, has been found to effectively reduce stress and improve well-being [29]. Increased utilization of university counseling services reflects greater awareness and reduced stigma regarding mental health support [30], [31]. Counseling centers saw increased utilization rates, which indicates that more students are accessing services available on campuses [30], [31].

This study's methodological implication lies in its qualitative approach, which provides an in-depth exploration of first-year university students' experiences, offering a rich understanding of their mental and emotional well-being. By employing thematic analysis, the research captures the nuanced perspectives of students as they navigate academic, social, and emotional challenges. This approach highlights the complexities of university adjustment that may not be fully captured through standardized scales. However, while qualitative methods offer depth, they do not measure the prevalence or intensity of these challenges across a larger population.

The findings suggest several practical implications for higher education institutions. Universities should implement structured mental health support programs tailored specifically to first-year students, as the study highlights the heightened risk of distress during this transition. Orientation programs should incorporate mental health awareness and coping strategies, informed by the challenges identified in this research. Additionally, peer mentoring initiatives—shown to mitigate loneliness and self-esteem issues—should be expanded to provide social support. Financial stress, another major contributor to mental health issues, underscores the need for financial literacy workshops to help students manage their expenses more effectively. Policymakers should also reassess financial aid policies to ensure adequate support for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, integrating counseling services within academic advising frameworks could provide a dual benefit—enhancing both mental well-being and academic performance. Addressing these concerns at the institutional and policy levels can increase student retention, academic success, and overall psychological well-being during the critical first-year of university life.

5. LIMITATIONS, RAMIFICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides an in-depth exploration of students' mental and emotional well-being, offering valuable insights for its improvement among university students. However, several limitations restrict the

generalizability of these results. The study's small-scale, qualitative design, focused on first- and second-year students, limits its applicability to a wider population. Additionally, the reliance on subjective self-reports introduces potential biases, such as selective memory or social desirability. While thematic analysis offers rich insights, it does not measure the extent or frequency of the challenges discussed. Future research could address this by integrating quantitative methods to assess the broader impact of these themes.

Another limitation is the self-selection bias; participants who volunteered may have had different experiences than non-participants, potentially skewing the results towards those with greater resilience or support. The qualitative format also precludes quantifying the relationships between academic difficulties and coping mechanisms. Additionally, the lack of a longitudinal design limits the ability to track how students' experiences and coping strategies evolve.

The ramifications of these findings extend to various aspects of university policies and student support services. The evidence suggests that failing to address mental health concerns in first-year students can lead to long-term academic disengagement, dropout risks, and deteriorating psychological well-being. The study emphasizes the need for proactive intervention rather than reactive measures, urging universities to integrate well-being support into academic frameworks rather than treating it as a separate entity.

Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of these factors beyond the first-year, assessing whether interventions result in sustained improvements. Additionally, cultural variations in university adaptation should be examined, as students from different backgrounds may experience unique stressors. Future studies should aim for a more diverse and representative sample, including students from various countries, and incorporate quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to provide a broader understanding of the interplay between academic, social, and emotional factors. Longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into the long-term progression of first-year students' mental and emotional well-being. Lastly, future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific university initiatives, such as resilience training or peer support networks, in mitigating the impact of first-year transition challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

This study offers an in-depth examination of the transitional experiences of first-year university students in Malaysia. It highlights the importance of understanding their mental and emotional well-being during this pivotal stage of their academic journey. Gaining insight into these experiences underscores the need for well-rounded support systems in higher education that address both academic and personal challenges, thereby fostering successful adjustment and overall well-being as students transition into university life.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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Pauviya A/P Guna Segar	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

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O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research involving human participants complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research (Reference No: UTMREC-2025-159).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [PAGS]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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