

The Role of University Support Services in Addressing Mental Health Challenges

A Narrative Review

¹Ferry D Satriono*, ²Tahereh Seghatoleslam, ¹Mohamad Hussain Habil, ³Winny N Wishwadewa

Affiliations:

¹ MAHSA University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

² University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

³ Independent Paediatric Researcher, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Correspondence: ferrydamarjata@mahsa.edu.my

ABSTRACT

University students face significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress, which may negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being. This narrative review explores the important role of university support services in addressing these challenges. Services such as on-campus counselling, wellness programs, and peer support initiatives are vital in providing professional guidance, coping strategies, and fostering a supportive environment. It also highlights barriers to accessing these services, including stigma, long wait times, and cultural or socioeconomic factors, which can affect students from seeking help. Innovative approaches like digital platforms, teletherapy, and holistic wellness programs can enhance accessibility and engagement. The review identifies research gaps, particularly regarding the long-term impacts of mental health services on academic success. Recommendations emphasize the importance of culturally competent care, collaboration with faculty and staff, and ongoing evaluation to improve service delivery. By prioritizing mental health services and adopting innovative strategies, universities can better support their students, reduce stigma, and promote help-seeking behaviours. This review calls for institutions to expand and improve their mental health programs to meet their students' diverse and growing needs.

Keywords

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Introduction

Young adults who are enrolled in higher education institutions occupy a distinct position regarding their mental health, attributable to their developmental phase, which is characterized by substantial transitions and the process of identity formation [1]. This phase of emerging adulthood frequently introduces novel responsibilities, an increase in autonomy, and pressures to achieve academic success, all of which may exacerbate levels of stress and mental health problems [2]. Furthermore, young adults are engaged in the navigation of social relationships, vocational choices, and personal identity development, rendering them more susceptible to issues related to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem [1–3]. Anxiety is frequently caused by the fear of not succeeding, time limits, and the pressure to perform, whereas depression can be driven by feelings of not measuring up or being alone [3]. Chronic stress, which comes from the pressures of university life, can affect students' thinking abilities and school performance. If these mental health problems are not dealt with, they can negatively affect students' health and job opportunities in the future. However, this time also provides an excellent chance for building resilience and coping skills, as many students are willing to learn new mental health techniques [2]. Universities that advocate for the mental health of these individuals can significantly contribute to the development of enduring emotional wellness [4,5].

Universities' mental health support services are important in mitigating students' psychological difficulties throughout their educational journey. Counselling services furnish individualized assistance, aiding students in managing concerns such as anxiety, depression, and stress through the provision of expert guidance and effective coping mechanisms [6]. Wellness initiatives foster comprehensive health by offering seminars on mindfulness, resilience, and stress mitigation, thereby enabling students to sustain their psychological well-being [7,8]. These services additionally provide peer support and crisis intervention programs, guaranteeing that students receive prompt assistance during critical situations. Through the cultivation of a nurturing environment, higher education institutions can mitigate the stigma associated with mental health and motivate students to seek assistance actively [5].

This review explores how well mental health support services at universities help students with their psychological issues. It looks at how these services help students deal with problems like anxiety, depression, and stress, and their overall impact on mental well-being. Ultimately, the goal is to provide insights into future directions for strengthening mental health support in university settings.

Results and Discussion

A. Prevalence and Risk Factors of Mental Health Issues in University Students

1. Statistics and Trends

Around the world, mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide are common among university students, impacting many of them [3,9,10]. Tan et al. [3] conducted a systematic review examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students' mental health, analysing studies with sample sizes ranging from 1,122 to over 1.2 million across global regions such as Africa, Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America. They found a median anxiety prevalence of 32%, with higher anxiety levels associated with being female, living in Asia (compared to Europe), and being an undergraduate. Akhtar et al. [9] reported in a systematic and meta-analysis review of the prevalence of depression among 76,608 university students in twenty low and middle-income countries, found that the overall prevalence of depression was 24.45% (95% CI: 19.2 – 30.5%) during their academic years. Wong et al. [10] reported in Malaysia that among 388 students, the prevalence of moderate to severe depression, anxiety, and stress among university students is 53.9%, 66.2% and 44.6%, respectively.

2. Risk Factors

The prevailing trends unequivocally suggest that mental health concerns are not merely isolated occurrences but rather constitute an integral component of a more extensive, systemic dilemma that academic institutions are compelled to tackle via comprehensive and readily available mental health support services [11–15]. Many risk factors impact the mental health issues of university students, with academic pressure being a major one [11]. The need for top grades, adhering to deadlines, and ongoing assessments can result in lasting stress, causing anxiety and exhaustion. Students frequently experience the urge to perform well academically, especially in competitive areas, which can lead to intense stress and fear of not succeeding. Social isolation is an important issue, particularly for students who relocate or study in unfamiliar settings, being away from family and known social circles can create feelings of loneliness, hence raising the chances of depression [12]. For international students, cultural differences and language challenges can heighten feelings of isolation, causing disturbance of mental health [13]. Financial strain is a significant factor, as numerous students contend with the obligations of tuition, living expenses, and educational loans. The apprehension surrounding the accumulation of debt or the management of daily financial commitments can induce anxiety and even depressive symptoms, particularly when fiscal instability impedes their capacity to concentrate on academic pursuits [14]. The transition towards independence in college can create stress, as they figure out how to handle things like schedules, money, and self-care. This situation may feel challenging for those without much practice with these responsibilities [15].

B. Types of University Support Services

On-campus counselling of mental health services constitutes a critical support system for university students, facilitating professional psychological assistance in a conducive environment. These services typically encompass individual counselling, group therapy, and crisis intervention, directed towards addressing issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Many universities currently offer complimentary or low-cost sessions to ensure that mental health care remains accessible to all students [16]. Nevertheless, the availability of these services frequently varies, with certain institutions experiencing prolonged waiting periods owing to heightened demand and constrained personnel resources. The structure of counselling programs may also differ, with some universities providing specialized counsellors for particular concerns, while others extend more generalized mental health support [16,17]. Despite initiatives to augment these services, accessibility remains an ongoing challenge, as stigma, insufficient awareness, and scheduling conflicts hinder numerous students from pursuing assistance. Universities are actively endeavouring to enhance the outreach, inclusivity, and responsiveness of on-campus counselling services to meet the students' needs better [5,17].

Peer group support is essential for enhancing students' mental health and overall well-being within higher education institutions by providing an environment conducive to mutual support among peers. The necessity for peer support initiatives emerges from the escalating demand for mental health services, thereby necessitating innovative approaches to enhance the accessibility of these services. A significant advantage of peer-led support groups is their ability to cultivate a sense of community, thereby allowing students to articulate their experiences and challenges within a safe environment [18]. Furthermore, peer mentoring is beneficial in mitigating stress levels, particularly for incoming students who benefit from the guidance offered by more experienced peers [5,18].

The University Wellness Program (UWP) is important for encouraging wellness and sustainability among students by giving them both practical and leadership skills. To put UWP into practice, universities can weave it into current courses, allowing students to work on various projects that solve campus issues. This initiative is based on the understanding that modern lifestyles and excessive screen time have harmed the mental and physical health of young people. By promoting an environmentally friendly mindset and empathy, UWP seeks to nurture a generation of leaders ready to face global challenges. The program invites active involvement from both faculty and students, which boosts teamwork and community involvement on campus [7]. A key benefit of UWP is that it offers real-world, hands-on learning opportunities that help students build vital soft skills, like critical thinking and effective communication [7].

Crisis intervention services hold an essential role in university mental health support, aimed at handling emergencies like suicidal thoughts and severe mental health issues. Many universities

provide 24/7 crisis hotlines, enabling students to get immediate help when experiencing intense emotional pain or self-harming thoughts [19,20]. These hotlines are manned by trained experts who offer counselling, safety plans, and referrals to emergency services if necessary. Besides hotlines, universities frequently have on-call counsellors or crisis teams ready to respond during mental health emergencies on campus [18].

Online and teletherapy services have become essential for college students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These online platforms allow students to receive mental health assistance from their homes, offering more flexibility and ease. Teletherapy has greatly enhanced access, especially for students who may encounter location, mobility, or scheduling challenges for in-person counselling [21].

C. Future Directions and Research Needs

Ongoing assessment of mental health support services is vital to guarantee they truly address the needs of university students. Regular evaluations can offer important information about usage rates, student satisfaction, and the overall effectiveness of the services provided. By gathering student input and examining results, universities can pinpoint areas needing improvement and modify their programs. Continuous evaluation helps institutions respond to new mental health trends and shifting student demographics. A regular evaluation process is key to promoting accountability and ensuring that mental health support services stay relevant and practical over time. See Fig. 1 for the relationship between risk factors and type of supports.

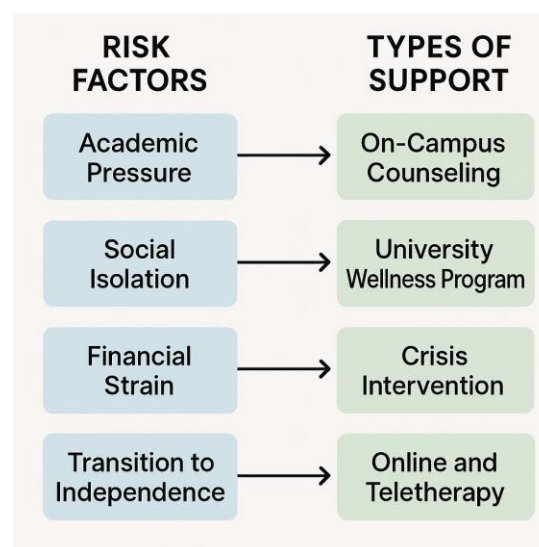


Fig 1. The correlation between common university student risk factors and the corresponding university support systems

Innovative methods for supporting mental health are becoming essential for connecting with university students and meeting their specific needs. Mobile applications focused on mental health can provide tools like guided meditations, mood tracking, and access to learning materials,

enabling students to take charge of their mental health whenever they choose. Peer networks create community support by linking students who can exchange their experiences and coping methods, thus alleviating feelings of loneliness. Comprehensive wellness programs combining mental, physical, and emotional health can offer a well-rounded approach, enhancing overall wellness through yoga, mindfulness, and nutrition workshops. Furthermore, using virtual reality technology for exposure therapy or relaxation techniques can give students creative ways to tackle anxiety and stress. Partnering with student organizations to collaboratively develop mental health programs ensures that initiatives are customized to the unique needs and preferences of the student population. By adopting these creative strategies, universities can establish a more engaging and effective mental health support system that resonates with modern students.

Identifying research gaps in university mental health support is essential for improving our knowledge of its effectiveness and areas needing enhancement. More research is necessary to evaluate the long-term effects of mental health support services on academic performance, graduation rates, and overall student retention. Comparative research among various universities can offer valuable insights into best practices, showcasing what succeeds in different environments and student groups. Furthermore, studies on the effectiveness of new methods, such as mobile applications and peer support networks, are still limited and require more investigation. Filling these gaps will improve the creation and execution of effective mental health strategies in higher education.

Conclusion

The review points out how important university mental health support services are for helping students deal with psychological issues like anxiety, depression, and stress. It stresses that accessibility is crucial, as limited resources and stigma can prevent students from getting the help they need. New strategies like mobile apps and peer networks are highlighted as effective ways to boost engagement and support. Moreover, culturally aware care and continuous collaboration with faculty and staff are emphasized to foster a more inclusive environment. Universities need to focus on improving mental health services to meet the changing needs of their students. Schools can offer better and more engaging support options by exploring new methods, like online resources and comprehensive wellness programs. Finally, the review notes research gaps, especially concerning the long-term effects of support services and the necessity for comparative studies between universities to guide best practices.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authors



Ferry D Satriono is a pediatric specialist currently teaching in the Pediatric Unit at the Faculty of Medicine, MAHSA University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is an experienced educator and clinical pediatrician interested in neurosciences. His academic focus also includes medical education development and research. He actively contributes to pediatric training and curriculum enhancement. He is committed to advancing both clinical practice and academic excellence in pediatrics. (email: ferrydamarjata@mahsa.edu.my).



Dr. Tahereh Seghatoleslam is a renowned professor and expert in psychology. Currently, she works at the Women's Studies Department at the Centre of Women and Family Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Her academic focus includes gender studies, mental health, addiction, and family dynamics. She is an active researcher with a strong track record of publishing in reputable international journals. Her contributions have significantly advanced scholarly understanding in psychology and women's studies. (email: drtseghatoleslam@googlemail.com).



Prof. Dr. Mohamad Hussain Habil is a distinguished professor and expert in the field of psychiatry. He teaches in the Psychiatry Unit, Faculty of Medicine, at MAHSA University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is both an experienced Academician and an internationally recognized psychiatric practitioner. He has actively contributed to the field through numerous publications in reputable international journals. His work reflects a deep commitment to advancing psychiatric research and education globally. (email: hussainhab@mahsa.edu.my).



Dr. Winny N Wishwadewa is a pediatric specialist currently working as an Independent Pediatric Researcher in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She is a dedicated practitioner interested in neuroscience and child development. Her work advances knowledge in pediatric growth, development, and neurological health. She is committed to contributing to research that improves outcomes for children. (email: mamiade.pediatric@gmail.com).