

The Community Engagement in Mental Health Advocacy

An Inter-University Program in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of community engagement in mental health advocacy, focusing on academically driven initiatives conducted by Ratna Yunita Setiyani Subardjo in Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive method, the research draws on institutional reports and participatory observations, framed by community psychology and participatory action research (PAR). Key activities included mental health campaigns, psychological counseling, educational outreach, and capacity building, all implemented in collaboration with institutions such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universitas Aisyiyah Yogyakarta. The interventions addressed student mental health through culturally sensitive, bilingual services and peer support models. Findings indicate that academic institutions can serve as powerful agents of social transformation when their members actively engage in community well-being. These initiatives significantly contributed to emotional resilience, stigma reduction, and inclusive mental health literacy. This case highlights the potential of cross-cultural academic partnerships in promoting sustainable and human-centered mental health practices.

Keywords
Community Well-Being
Emotional Resilience
Health Practices
Mental Health Literacy
Stigma Reduction

Article history
Received 15 June 2025
Revised 1 17 July 2025
Revised 2 31 August 2025
Accepted 2 September 2025

journal.iistr.org/index.php/JSCD
DOI: 10.56741/jscd.v2i03.1115

JSCD
Journal of Social and Community Development

Vol. 2, No. 03, pp. 111-120

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Introduction

Community engagement in mental health has gained increasing attention in recent decades as a strategy to enhance public mental well-being and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. Academic institutions and their members have proven crucial in promoting sustainable and culturally sensitive mental health interventions [1],[2]. In this context, the contribution of Ratna Yunita Setiyani Subardjo, a doctoral student and lecturer at Universitas Aisyiyah Yogyakarta (UNISA), is a prominent case of international academic activism. Her engagement in psychological counseling and advocacy programs across the student communities in Malaysia reflects the integration of scholarly work with real-life humanitarian issues [3].

As mental health issues rise, especially among students, targeted interventions are essential. The academic community's role in advocacy and outreach work is central to addressing these challenges [4]. Ratna's work aligns with this global movement, offering preventive, promotive, curative, and rehabilitative services.

The mental health landscape in Malaysia reflects both growing awareness and persistent gaps in service accessibility, particularly among youth and marginalized populations. While national mental health policies have evolved, implementation remains uneven across regions and institutions [5]. Within this context, community engagement has emerged as a practical and inclusive strategy to bridge service disparities and empower individuals to participate in their mental wellness. Academic-led initiatives have played an essential role in amplifying mental health education, fostering resilience, and cultivating culturally appropriate support systems at the grassroots level. These efforts contribute significantly to national goals to improve psychological well-being through collaborative, community-based approaches.

One compelling aspect of community engagement in Malaysia is the role of cross-cultural collaboration, particularly in academic and student settings where diverse populations interact. Universities serve as microcosms of society, offering a dynamic space for disseminating mental health literacy and implementing targeted interventions. Ratna Yunita Setiyani Subardjo's work exemplifies this, as her initiatives provide direct psychological support and cultivate mental health awareness through seminars, workshops, and peer support training. Her focus on inclusive and sustainable practices ensures that the services reach a broad range of beneficiaries, including international students, who often face unique challenges related to acculturation, isolation, and academic pressure.

Furthermore, Ratna's model of academic activism integrates research, pedagogy, and community service, echoing the transformative ideals of engaged scholarship. By leveraging her dual identity as an academic and practitioner, she demonstrates how higher education institutions can be instrumental in promoting psychosocial well-being beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Her contributions reflect a growing paradigm shift in which scholars

actively address social issues and collaborate with local and international stakeholders to create systemic change. This manuscript explores such forms of engagement, highlighting the methods, challenges, and broader implications of community-based mental health advocacy in Malaysia, particularly within university contexts.

Materials and Methods

This article utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the impact and process of community mental health engagement. Data was collected from institutional activity reports and personal communications. The analytical framework draws from community psychology principles and participatory action research (PAR), emphasizing interventions' collaborative, empowering, and sustainable nature [6],[7]. Key theoretical models referenced include the Social Ecological Model [8] and the Mental Health Continuum Model [9], both of which stress the interaction between individuals, communities, and broader systems.

The data sources include documentation from a series of mental health outreach programs facilitated between 2022 and 2024 in university settings across Malaysia. These reports detail intervention formats, participant demographics, thematic focus areas, and feedback collected during and after activities. Personal communications with program participants, student leaders, and collaborating academic staff provided rich contextual insights into the perceived impact and challenges of the engagement efforts. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the data collection, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation in feedback mechanisms.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to engagement strategies, cultural adaptability, and student empowerment. Particular attention was paid to aligning interventions with community psychology principles, including inclusivity, respect for diversity, and the co-construction of mental health solutions. Integrating the Social Ecological Model allowed the researchers to categorize findings across multiple levels (individual, interpersonal, institutional, and community). At the same time, the Mental Health Continuum Model helped map participant well-being outcomes on a spectrum ranging from languishing to flourishing. This dual-theoretical lens facilitated a nuanced understanding of how academic-based mental health advocacy operates within and beyond university boundaries.

Action and Implementation

This community engagement was conducted at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in collaboration with UNISA Yogyakarta. Especially, activities involved collaboration with UKM's PsiTra (the Center for Psychological Studies and Human Well-being) and the Indonesian Student Association (Persatuan Pelajar Indonesia UKM).

A. Mental Health Campaigns

Online and offline workshops focusing on emotional resilience, academic stress management, and coping strategies for international students. Mental Health Campaigns are essential initiatives designed to support the emotional well-being of international students. These campaigns include online and offline workshops on building emotional resilience, managing academic stress, and developing effective coping strategies. By addressing the unique challenges faced by students studying away from their home countries, such as cultural adjustment, isolation, and academic pressure, these programs aim to foster a supportive community and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. Interactive sessions, peer support groups, and expert-led discussions empower students to recognize their emotional needs and seek help when necessary, promoting long-term well-being.

Fig. 1 illustrates a training activity that students participated in. The atmosphere appears active and interactive, with students directly engaged in learning. The significant number of participants reflects their enthusiasm and interest in the delivered material.



Fig. 1. Training session attended by students

B. Psychological Counseling

One-on-one sessions and group therapy were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and English for students and their families. Psychological Counseling services are offered to support the mental and emotional health of students and their families through personalized one-on-one sessions and group therapy. These services are available in Bahasa Indonesia and English to ensure accessibility and comfort for a diverse community. Professional counselors provide a safe, confidential environment where individuals can explore personal challenges, including academic pressure, cultural adaptation, family issues, and emotional distress. Group therapy sessions encourage shared experiences and peer support, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. This bilingual approach ensures that students and families receive the psychological care they need in a language they trust.

These counseling services are designed to be culturally sensitive, recognizing each individual's unique backgrounds, values, and belief systems. Special attention is given to international students who may face additional stressors such as homesickness, language barriers, and acculturation challenges. Counselors integrate culturally informed practices into therapeutic approaches, creating interventions that are respectful and relevant to the lived experiences of both local and international populations. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms ensure that the counseling process remains responsive to participants' evolving needs, enhancing therapeutic outcomes over time.

Moreover, the counseling program is deeply integrated with broader mental health advocacy efforts on campus. It synergizes with peer support initiatives, mental health awareness campaigns, and academic stress management workshops. This holistic strategy addresses immediate psychological concerns and empowers students and families to build long-term resilience. By embedding psychological counseling within the fabric of the educational environment, the program promotes mental well-being as an essential component of academic success and personal development.

Fig. 2 shows documentation of a counseling session with participants. The activity highlights interaction between facilitators and participants, reflecting an atmosphere of openness and support during the counseling process.



Fig. 2. Documentation with counseling participants

C. Educational Outreach

Public lectures, webinars, and guest teaching engagements at Taylor's University, Albukhary International University, and the International Islamic University Malaysia. Educational Outreach initiatives foster academic collaboration and knowledge sharing through various public engagement activities. These include public lectures, interactive webinars, and guest teaching sessions at prominent institutions such as Taylor's University, Albukhary International University, and the International Islamic University Malaysia. These programs address contemporary issues in education, mental health, and cultural adaptation while promoting intercultural dialogue and academic excellence. By engaging with diverse student and faculty communities across these universities, the outreach efforts contribute to building stronger regional networks and advancing inclusive, cross-cultural learning environments in higher education.

Fig. 3 illustrates outreach activities that contribute to building stronger regional networks and promoting inclusive, cross-cultural learning environments within higher education.



Fig. 3. Outreach efforts in higher education

D. Capacity Building

Training student volunteers as peer counselors and mental health ambassadors. Capacity-building programs focus on empowering students by equipping them with essential skills to serve as peer counselors and mental health ambassadors. Through intensive training sessions, participants learn about active listening, empathy, basic psychological support, and referral mechanisms. The initiative enhances students' personal growth and leadership capabilities and builds a supportive campus culture where mental well-being is prioritized. By fostering a peer-based support system, this program encourages early intervention, reduces mental health stigma,

and promotes resilience among the student body, creating a sustainable network of mental health advocates within the university community.

Fig. 4 depicts training programs designed with licensed psychologists, academic staff, and community mental health practitioners to ensure scientific validity and contextual relevance. The modules incorporate interactive workshops, role-plays, and case studies, enabling student volunteers to practice real-life scenarios and strengthen their confidence in providing support.



Fig. 4. Training programs with professional collaboration

These training programs are developed with licensed psychologists, academic staff, and community mental health practitioners to ensure the content is scientifically grounded and contextually relevant. The modules include interactive workshops, role-plays, and case studies, allowing student volunteers to practice real-life scenarios and build their confidence in providing support. A special emphasis is placed on understanding mental health within the cultural and social frameworks of Malaysian and Indonesian student communities, ensuring that peer counselors are prepared to respond with sensitivity and appropriateness.

Beyond technical skills, the program nurtures participants' strong sense of social responsibility and ethical awareness. Students are encouraged to act as change agents, promoting mental health awareness through campus campaigns, seminars, and collaborative events with student organizations**.** This multiplier effect strengthens the initiative's overall impact by embedding mental health literacy into everyday student life. As trained ambassadors, these students support their peers and contribute to long-term institutional change, fostering an environment where mental health is openly discussed, respected, and supported.

Discussion

Mental health challenges among university students have been extensively documented. Factors include academic pressure, cultural displacement, isolation, and lack of access to mental health services [10],[11]. The activity approach exemplifies community engagement best

practices: addressing mental health through culturally relevant, accessible, and participatory means.

The model resonates with literature advocating holistic, community-embedded mental health promotion [4],[12]. Activities focusing on empowering individuals through psychoeducation and emotional support correspond to the evidence that such methods effectively increase resilience and reduce stigma [13],[14]. Moreover, the interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-national scope illustrate how academic diaspora can catalyze mental health innovation [15]. Integrating academic roles with social responsibility reflects the evolving expectation of higher education institutions to serve as agents of societal transformation [16].

The initiative also reflects the principles of culturally responsive practice by centering the linguistic, social, and emotional needs of Indonesian students living abroad. By offering bilingual counseling and integrating familiar cultural frameworks, the program reduces barriers to seeking help and fosters a sense of belonging. This approach aligns with research indicating that culturally tailored interventions are more effective in engaging minority and international student populations, as they resonate more deeply with the lived experiences of the target groups [17],[18].

In addition, the program's peer-led model contributes to the creation of supportive micro-communities that normalize help-seeking behaviour and encourage mutual care [19]. Peer counselors, as trusted student community members, are uniquely positioned to detect signs of distress and offer immediate support or referral. This informal, yet structured layer of support helps to mitigate the bottlenecks in formal mental health systems, which are often under-resourced and inaccessible. Studies have shown that peer-led interventions are cost-effective and have high acceptability and impact, especially among youth. Importantly, the collaboration between academic institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia fosters a model of transnational solidarity in mental health advocacy. This partnership demonstrates how cross-border educational linkages can be leveraged for social good, especially in addressing shared public health concerns. By embedding mental health support within the fabric of academic exchange and mobility programs, the initiative expands the scope of what international education can achieve, not merely as a vehicle for knowledge transfer but also as a platform for social empowerment, equity, and collective well-being.

Conclusion

The community engagement work in Malaysia is a model of academic-driven humanitarian advocacy. Her mental health initiatives serve international students' immediate needs and foster a culture of empathy, resilience, and collective healing. This case highlights the strategic role of academic institutions and their members in global mental health movements,

emphasizing that meaningful change often begins with small, consistent actions rooted in compassion and science.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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