

The Relationship between Stress and Emotional Intelligence among Postgraduate Students: The Case Study at Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STI Policy), University Technology Malaysia

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Abstract

Introduction: Students facing one stress typically face multiple risky educational circumstances that threaten an array of their study outcomes. Experiencing multiple academic stress can intensify the negative effects that such disorders has on the whole person's physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive development.

Methods: This paper is a survey study, and it discusses the effect of academic stress and emotional intelligence on students' psychological and emotional well-being. The purpose is to understand the relationship between stress and emotional intelligence among postgraduate students of policy school. The data has been collected through online survey that was sent through emails and links on WhatsApp and social networking sites. The accumulated data were then analyzed, and descriptive statistics as well as correlation study were used to interpret and evaluate the respondents' background, academic stress, and emotional intelligence.

Results: The key finding of this research is that stress and emotional intelligence are important; both have effects on the physical and mental well-being of postgraduate students. Indeed, there is academic stress among postgraduate students of Perdana School of (STI Policy) caused by academic workload, performance pressure, self-esteem, time management skills, and study-personal life balancing. Consequently, students use emotional intelligence as a coping mechanism to manage stress.

Conclusion: It is highly advisable for the head of the schools, lecturers, and supervisors to look comprehensively at this matter and tackle the consequences of this issue by emphasizing more on students' wellbeing so they can Graduate On Time (GOT) and enjoy their study life.

Keywords: Psychological Well-being, Stress, Emotional Intelligence, Postgraduate Students

Introduction

It is a universal perception that higher levels of education requires laborious studies from the students. Such expectations put the students in stress and anxiety, which can curb the actual capability of a student to perform well in his academic career (1). This stress level is higher in the initiating year of his/her academic program. It has been seen that most student dropouts occur during the first year of their courses. The primary reason for such dropouts is considered to be high levels of stress and anxiety in the students (2). However, studies have shown that this first year of stress and coping with the stress is not an indicator of students' success in his final year. He can learn and unlearn managing himself and his studies in a constructive manner over the course of his program (3).

Being a postgraduate student is different from being an undergraduate. Postgraduate students have to plan, organize, and structure their own learning. Research and reading will

be their own responsibility. They have to set their aims and parameters but there will be guidance, checks, and deadlines along the way to keep them on track.

At Masters Level, they are expected to gain and demonstrate skills such as critical analysis, inductive and deductive thinking, and logical reasoning. This is while the PhD is the next level where a contribution to knowledge is expected. A very different attitude is needed towards pursuing a postgraduate degree. At the undergraduate level, there seemed to be a large number of students who couldn't really be bothered, who go to lectures because they have to, and who regard social life to be the sole reason for attending university. As postgraduate students, everyone is keen and enthusiastic in lectures, and rather than gossiping, they plan academic discussions over coffee.

Embarking on a postgraduate degree whilst working full time can be extremely challenging in terms of trying to balance work commitments and personal life, with the demands of academic studies. Being a student parent is double the task. There are classes, studying, assessments, writing, conferences, workshops and presentations that need to be juggled with the nursery and school run, play dates and weekend entertainment. Thus, it requires time and commitment. Managing a high workload, engaging late night studying and writing, living in a new town and away from family and friends will indirectly lead to stressful circumstances. Stress occurs when the demands are greater than the ability to cope.

Dealing with the stress is one key factor that a postgraduate student must overcome in order to successfully graduate. Most students who are intellectually capable of succeeding in college have difficulties with a variety of non-cognitive competencies such as time and stress management, establishing positive relationships, and making wise decisions. They may adopt dysfunctional coping styles that can cripple their academic efforts. Each of these problems can be described as a lack of emotional intelligence. Being more aware of the emotions and reaction to it will help managing stress.

Stress and Stressors

Stress affects most people in some way. It is a natural feeling that has been designed to help us cope with the challenging situations. The right kind of stress encourages us towards change and growth. However, when stress exists for an extended period of time, it can become a burden or even a health risk. Commonly, stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand.

The idea of stress is different in each person. For students, stress is something that is negative and unpleasant. The word "stress" that they thought is actually distress. Distress is a negative emotion that most people generally try to avoid. The general characteristics of a person in distress are: being over-aroused; tense or unable to relax; touchy, easily upset, or irritable; easily

startled or fidgety, and demonstrating intolerance of any interruption or delay. When distress is no longer tolerable, it may lead to poor decision-making and will result in an increased prevalence of psychological problems like depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide ideation (4). Stressors can also have good sides. The good kind of stress is called eustress and it can motivate us to focus on a task or take action and solve a problem. In this situation, stress is manageable and even helpful.

In recent years, stress, anxiety, worry, and aggression have all increased. Stress has been labeled as "The 20th Century Disease" in a United Nations Report. Stress among students is an unavoidable phenomenon. The latest American College Health Association (ACHA) report indicated that approximately half of the students reported more than average or tremendous stress in 2014 compared to 2015 (5). Postgraduate students are exposed to more stress. They face different kinds of stressors in their studies and in their lives. Factors such as physical and mental, peer pressure, expectation, difficulty prioritizing, competition, freedom, family, job, relationship and social were the main sources of stress among the students. They experience stress as they combine busy lives and the demands of study and work while trying to spend more time for friends and family. Stress is also associated with overwhelmed feeling, self-doubt, and perfectionism.

Stress levels in students can increase due to different reasons such as; 1) students have to make significant adjustments to college life; 2) pressure of studies; strain placed on interpersonal relationships; and 3) changes in lifestyle; study-personal life balancing [6]. In addition, students in college experience stress related to academic requirements, support systems, and ineffective coping skills. The occurrence of stress among the postgraduate students is increasing. Stress may not only affect the academic performance but also students' physical and mental health. Stress will lead to sleep disturbance, poor eating habits, emotionally unstable, alcohol consumption, smoking consumption and to the extent of drug consumption. Stress may also increase the risk of having heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and several other mental ailments [7].

Stress Management

Every individual has his/her own self-concept about his capability to handle a situation to perform well in a task, which is termed as self-efficacy (8). The positive perception of a student about himself/herself plays a strong role in dealing with stressful situations. There is yet a difference between believing in one's capability (self-efficacy/trait EI) and being capable. But both these being capable and believing to be capable have complementary aspects in one's personality (2). The ability to manage feelings and handle stress through EI as a coping strategy

has been found to be important for success. EI has as much to do with knowing when and how to express emotion as it does with controlling (9). Hence, emotional intelligence can potentially moderate the effect of stress.

Emotional Intelligence in Stress Management

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a quite well known concept, which comes forward in describing stress and managing with it. Goleman gives the most popular definition of EI due to the popularity of his books on the subject. He states EI as: "The ability to monitor one's own and other's emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions".

As per (10), emotional intelligence is defined as:

"Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth".

Based on these definitions, it can be said that having high EI gives an added advantage to students academically. Interestingly we find that a good-scorer with a low EI, is less likely to achieve Graduate on Time (GOT) from the University unlike a low-scorer with a high EI (2). EI is closely linked to the academic performance of a post-graduate student. It is one of the most contributing factors in successful degree completion apart from involvement and satisfaction in University life and University support-system strategies in various academic activities (11).

The two important perspectives of believing oneself to be capable and secondly being actually capable are considered to be the two important perspectives on the nature of EI, which are explicitly termed as,

- i. Trait-based EI (believing oneself to be emotionally capable/self-efficacy)
- ii. Ability-based EI (being emotionally competent)

Trait-based EI is more significant because people always act according to their beliefs about their capability rather than their actual abilities. In order to judge the human performance, ability-based EI is the best indicator (12). Bar-On took an even comprehensive approach and designated EI as "a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands" (13). Parker et al., (2016) give four dimensions of EI using the Bar-On model, namely:

- i. Intrapersonal (recognition about one's own feelings).
- ii. Interpersonal (empathy for others).
- iii. Adaptability (ability to best fit one's emotions according to dynamic situations and conditions).
- iv. Stress management (ability to control or resist an impulse).

When it comes to academic activities, EI can assess academic success better than other measures of intelligence. Stress management being an important dimension of EI, is a strong predictor of academic performance of a student (14). Therefore, methods and strategies to cope with the stress, should be a part of the academic curriculum (8). There are very few studies in

Malaysia that investigate the relationship between stress and emotional intelligence. Thus, this study is to describe the prevalence of stress and emotional intelligence among the postgraduate students of Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation, UTM.

Methods

Eighty-one respondents (100%) of Postgraduate Perdana Policy School students were contacted to answer this online survey via email or WhatsApp application, but only fifty-four (66.67%) were completed and managed to collect. The main objective of this paper is to measure factors contributing to the stress of Policy School students. Therefore, the study was conducted at this school level only; where a policy subjects to them is stress. The questionnaire consists of three sections; demographic information, factors contributed to stress and emotional intelligence coping strategies.

Participants

The study is purely based on a quantitative method. All postgraduate students from Perdana School, University Technology Malaysia were requested to answer the questionnaire that measures "stress and emotional intelligence". The participation was on voluntary basis.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared on the basis of an initial literature review regarding stress, conflict, and management process. A demographic questionnaire was used to capture information about the sample. Then, an adapted version of the Student Stress Scale (10) was used to measure academic obstacles. Similarly, the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (15) and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (16) were used to determine the emotional intelligence among the postgraduate students.

The stress section in the questionnaire dealt with eight stressors (consists of 27 items) affecting postgraduate students. The eight stressors which were analyzed were academic workload, performance pressure, self-esteem, time management skills, relationship with lecturers / supervisors, relationship with colleagues, university facilities and study-personal life balancing.

Reliability Statistics for the Stress Items	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.922	27

On the other hand, the emotional intelligence section constituted of questions to gauge the level of EI among the postgraduate students within the two main domains of EI; Ability-Based EI and Trait-Based EI.

Reliability Statistics for Emotional intelligence	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.959	22

The survey questions were close ended and were designed in the form of statements to be answered with a Likert scale. A five-point Likert scale was used that ranges as "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree" and "strongly agree".

Data collection

The data has been collected through online survey sent

through emails and links on WhatsApp and social networking sites. The online survey is a convenient way to gather data, since respondents can choose the appropriate time for answering. The online survey provides quick response and large and easy coverage of respondents due to the reach of Internet and smart phones now days. In addition, the researchers have not directly affected the respondents, so the reliability and validity of the study is not compromised by this method. Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 24. Dichotomous variables were expressed as frequencies and percentages. Continuous variables for stress and EI were expressed as means and standard deviation. Pearson’s correlation analysis was used to examine the link among the continuous variables. Descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the demographic background of the respondents. The obtained results are presented in forms of percentages, means, and standard deviations. Referential analysis through the use of Pearson’s correlation, on the other hand, was carried out in order to establish the degree of relationship between the emotional intelligence and stress. All the results are presented in tables and graphs and are accompanied by descriptions explaining the results. Discussion of the results is carried out in order to drawn necessary conclusion, based on the findings of the research.

Results

Socio Demographic Distribution

The survey was carried out in Perdana School of Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy (STI Policy), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). A total of 81 postgraduate students were contacted to answer this online survey via email or WhatsApp application. Since the participation was on voluntary basis, the sample relied on the availability and willingness of students to respond and participate.

Thus, the demographic profile of the overall sample is shown in Table 1. Higher ratio of female students participated in this study (59.1%). The majority of respondents were in the age group of between 30 – 39 years (59.1%). Among the respondents, 84.1% were Malaysians and 79.5% of them were married. More than half (59.1%) of the respondents were currently Master by taught course, 11.4% were Master by research while the rest (29.5 %) were pursuing their PhD degree. It can be mentioned that the Perdana School has more full- time students (72.7%) than part time students (25.5%).

Identifying Stressors

The survey explored 8 possible sources of stress spanning academic workload, performance pressure, self-esteem, time management skills, relationship with lecturers/supervisors, relationship with colleagues, university facilities and study-personal life balancing. All 8 stressors were found to have a direct impact to postgraduate students. A list of all stressors are given in Table 2 and 3. The intensity of stress is diagrammatically represented in Figure 2.

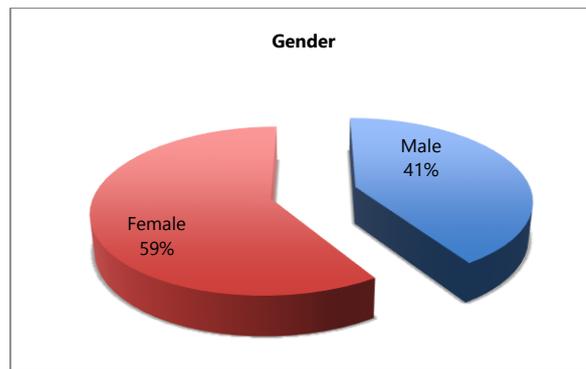


Figure 1. Respondents' Gender

Table 1. Demographic information of respondents (n = 44)

	Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	18	40.9
	Female	26	59.1
Age	≤ 29	3	6.8
	30 – 39	28	63.1
	40 – 49	12	27.3
Nationality	≥ 50	1	2.3
	Malaysian	37	84.1
	Non-Malaysian	7	15.9
Marital Status	Single	9	20.5
	Married	35	79.5
	Divorced	0	0
	Widowed	0	0
Religion	Separated	0	0
	Partnered	0	0
	Muslim	40	90.9
	Kristian	3	6.8
	Hindu	0	0
Education Level	Buddha	1	2.3
	Other (Please specify)	0	0
	Master (taught course)	26	59.1
	Master (by research)	5	11.4
Mode of study	PhD	13	29.5
	Full- time student	32	72.7
	Part- time student	13	29.5

According to the data, the primary stressor for currently enrolled postgraduate students in the Perdana School was the performance pressure related stressor with mean falls at 3.917. The study-personal life balancing related stressors were the next major stressor and stand at a mean of 3.773. This stress is a kind of response student may have when demands and pressures challenge their ability to cope.

Another stressor for high stress among the postgraduate students were the academic workload related stressors (mean 3.710). Stressors such as the amount of material to study, understanding content, doing research, and writing for assignment or thesis contribute to student stress. Time management skills stressors have greater impact to the respondents with the mean of 3.664. Relationship with lecturers or supervisors

and relationship with colleagues were other stressors which affected students' lives.

The items in the questionnaire are based on a 1 to 5 point Likert scale. However, in this study, respondents' responses with a Mean score of 0.00 to 2.99 are

considered low where respondents will be more to disagree with the manifestation of EI. Those with a mean score of 3.00 are neutral, while responses with a mean score of 3.10 to 5.00 are considered high and they are more agreed with the manifestation of EI.

Table 2. Manifestation of stress among postgraduate students

Stressor	Means	SD
Academic workload		
The amount of material to study	3.59	1.168
Difficulty in understanding material/ content	3.64	1.014
Doing research (for research project or assignments)	3.77	0.937
Writing assignments/ thesis	3.84	0.888
Performance pressure		
Meeting the demand from lecturers/supervisors	3.82	0.947
Presentations/ Viva	4.00	1.078
Tests/ Examinations/ Assessments	3.93	0.846
Self- esteem		
Language competency	3.20	1.133
Fear of making serious mistakes	3.41	1.245
Worrying about grades or achieving milestones	3.55	1.210
Time management skills		
Lack of time to review what has been learnt/ studied	3.77	1.118
Meeting deadlines for assignments/ progress reports	3.91	1.053
Not being able to effectively manage time	3.25	1.241
Relationship with lecturers/ supervisors		
Lack of support from lecturer/ supervisor	2.82	1.334
Lack of communication from lecturer/ supervisor	2.82	1.299
Understanding the expectations of lecturers/ supervisor	3.43	1.108
Difficulty in maintaining relationship with lecturers/ supervisor	2.73	1.169
Relationship with colleagues		
Working with uncooperative colleagues	3.00	1.312
Working with incompetent colleagues	3.05	1.219
Relationship problems with colleagues	2.57	1.246
Competition among colleagues	2.73	1.107
Universities facilities		
Inconvenient timetabling	3.07	1.208
Availability of the academic materials in library	3.07	1.246
Availability of campus facility	2.98	1.110
Social life in campus (sports/ clubs)	2.64	0.967
study-personal life balancing		
Dealing with family responsibility	3.77	1.138
Juggling work, study and personal life (life balancing)	3.77	1.179

Table 3. Manifestation of stress among postgraduate students according to the Main Stressors

Stressor	Means	SD
Academic workload	3.710	0.790
Performance pressure	3.917	0.821
Self- esteem	3.386	0.937
Time management skills	3.644	0.936
Relationship with lecturers/ supervisor	2.950	1.083
Relationship with colleagues	2.835	1.071
University facilities	2.937	0.763
study-personal life balancing	3.773	1.103

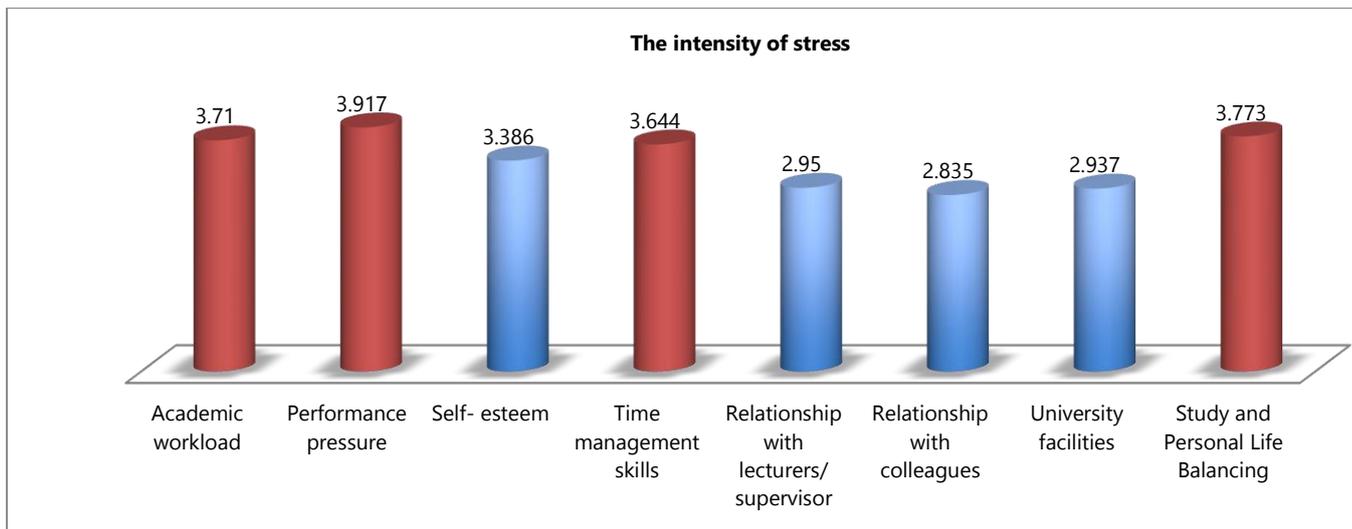


Figure 2. The intensity of stress

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation for Emotional Intelligence (EI)

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional Intelligence	3.95	0.650

Table 4, presents the overall Mean and Standard Deviation score of EI among the Postgraduate students in UTM, Perdana School. Since the Mean of EI is 3.95 therefore, we can conclude that students in Perdana School are very close to being categorized as emotionally intelligent as a whole. However, the tables below will explore more areas of intelligence among Postgraduates.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of domains of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Domains of EI	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability-Based EI	3.96	0.672
Trait-Based EI	3.94	0.674

The results of Table 5 depicts the mean and standard deviation scores of the two domains of EI investigated in this study. The mean for Ability-Based EI is less than the Median, (Mean of Ability-Based EI = 3.96 < Median of Ability-Based EI = 4.00). This implies that the postgraduate students in the Perdana School are very close to being among those who have the gifted ability to be emotionally intelligent. However, the gap between the mean and median of trait-based EI is nominal with a difference of 0.01. More precisely, the mean of trait-based EI is 3.94 and the median of trait-based EI is 9.95. Therefore, it can be concluded that the postgraduate Perdana School students have almost reached up the mark of being Trait-based emotionally intelligent.

While the findings from Table 6 indicate EI among Perdana School Postgraduate students in an explicit manner, disclosing the contents in Ability-Based and Trait-Based domains of EI. The students are relatively more emotionally intelligent in the domain of Trait-Based EI than Ability-Based EI. This has been proved by the comparison of the mean and median of the two domains in table 5. However, the learning process includes immense room for improvement. Having the ability to regulate emotions, uplifts students to deal with pleasant

and unpleasant feelings. Being emotionally intelligent is the bench-mark of living a successful student life where a student has to struggle with occasional failures and stressful situations as well as pressure to perform well in academic activities (17).

The Relationship between EI and Stress

The relationship between EI and stress was investigated using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Preliminary analysis was performed to ensure no violation of the assumption of normality and linearity. There was a negative correlation with small strength of association between the variables. The value of $r = -0.167$, $N = 44$, $p = 0.278$, with high level of EI associated with lower levels of stress (Table 7). It indicates a negative correlation between EI and Stress. The more people use their EI, the less stress they experience.

Table 6: Manifestation of EI in Postgraduate students

Emotional Intelligence (EI)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability-Based EI	3.96	0.672
I have control over my emotions.	4.23	0.774
I have the strength to cope with any challenges.	4.09	0.884
When I feel difficulty in my educational activities, I remember times I faced similar obstacles and overcame them.	4.00	0.835
I expect that I will do well on most of the tasks I am assigned.	4.00	0.940
I motivate myself by imagining good grades to academic tasks I am given.	3.77	1.075
I can learn from my mistakes and do better next time.	4.14	0.905
When I am in a positive mood, I can perform in a more creative way in my assigned projects.	4.41	0.757
I energize myself whenever I feel low.	3.80	0.904
I seek out activities that release my stress.	4.02	0.927

I always finish a task on time.	3.52	1.131
I have the ability to manage work, study and personal life.	3.61	0.920
Trait-Based EI	3.94	0.674
I am a self-motivated person.	3.91	0.984
I always tell myself that I am a competent person.	3.84	0.834
I always encourage myself to do the best.	4.09	0.772
I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them.	4.07	0.789
Prioritizing is my way to manage a task.	3.95	0.914
I am good at managing my moods and try not to bring negative emotions on my studies.	3.64	1.059
I can manage good relationship with my supervisor/lecturer/colleague.	3.95	0.806
I develop a positive learning environment.	3.89	0.784
I am a multiple task performer.	3.91	0.936
I get along well in a team setting.	4.11	0.754
I take constructive criticism well.	4.02	0.698

Table 7. Relationship between EI and Stress

	<i>r</i> - value	Sig.
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	-0.167	0.278

Discussion

The main focus of the present study was to examine the relationship between stress and emotional intelligence (EI) among postgraduate students in the Perdana School of University Technology Malaysia (UTM). It was determined that there was a strong negative correlation between stress and EI. It indicates that students with higher EI in Perdana School have less stress levels whereas, those with lower EI, experience more stress.

Postgraduate students experience stress as they work hard and struggle with their academic life. Entering this life, they have expectations of being stressed and tired to some degree and most students report their struggle was worth it to them towards the end as the stress can prepare them to deal with life events later on.

Academic workload was the major stressor for postgraduate students in Perdana School UTM. Postgraduate students are depressed due to the amount of material to study, lack of time in reviewing what has been studied, doing research and it was also a stressor when it comes to the writing part. Gazder et al. (18), stated that stress due to work demand cause emotional disturbances to a person. However, according to Friedman (10), and also previous researchers highlighted that stress associated with the adjustment to and academic demands of university students is pertinent, as it has been reported as the most common health factor affecting academic performance amongst university students. This was followed by study-personal life balancing at the mean of 3.773. It can be described as stress arising when one's juggling in between those events.

The results of the survey suggested that postgraduate students are also receiving high stress in performance pressure related stressors. This stress arises from meeting the lecturers' or supervisors' demand, presentations or viva and when the students need to sit for tests, exams or assessments. Surprisingly, all respondents said that presentations or viva was the most stressful event for them (mean 4.00). Many people feel nervous when speaking publicly. Sometimes, it is not only a stressful event but also nerve-wrecking and intimidating.

The postgraduate students also experienced stress when they were worried about grades and achieving milestones. As postgraduate students, they don't need to be scared of failure. However, the results suggested that it was one of the main stressors (mean 3.410). In addition, the respondents find their academic experience to be more stressful when they have to meet the deadlines for assignments or progress reports. This may be attributed by work overload and short durations given to complete a specific task.

Post-graduate studies require a long-term collaboration between students and lecturers or supervisors. It has been proven that supervising and guiding by the supervisors and lecturers will lead students to great success [19]. For instance, as a research student, having a close relationship will help to stimulate their development and research experience. Furthermore, a strong relationship that develops between a student and lecturers or supervisors may also result in the establishment of a strong network in the future. Among all the stressors, university facilities and relationship with colleagues seems to be the least contributing stress factors.

Conclusion

Although much remains to be learned, the current research offers strong support for the view that stress is a part of students' life; it is neither good nor bad. The challenge is how to manage it. There is no doubt that the findings of this study have a number of implications that require attention in eliminating or reducing the stressors among postgraduate students. Therefore, a number of mitigation measures may be considered.

Stress often occur among students; affect both the physical and mental well-being, as well as both their performance in university and at home. The objective of this study was to analyze the consequence of different types of stressors on students' wellbeing. Eventually, researchers examined the effects of academic workload, performance pressure, self-esteem, time management skills, relationship with supervisors, relationship with colleagues, university facilities, and study-personal life balancing on students' stress level. The results clearly indicated the following: (a) The main factors contributed to academic stress among postgraduate students at Perdana School were performance pressure, study-personal life balancing, academic workload, and time management skills; (b) Genders are not differing much on how they respond to stress and emotional intelligence; (c) The relationship between stress and emotional intelligence are not significant due to the small sample

size; (d) Emotional intelligence can be used as a coping mechanisms to manage stress among postgraduate students.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these outcomes. First, academic stress is a difficult concept to define because it involves individual judgments and different evaluations. Second, evaluations will likely continue to vary because it is unlikely that all researchers will agree upon the same set of assumptions, measures, and datasets to use when quantifying academic stress. Third, there are many more factors contributing to academic stress that need to be considered in future research. Fourth, dean of the school, supervisors, lecturers, and researchers must make extra effort to understand students' difficulties. Fifth, there are several ways that the investigation of students' stress and coping mechanisms could be expanded and improved. Among them are to create a framework that guide students on how to overcome their difficulties.

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