Exploring the Role of Emotional Intelligence in Building Resilience among Malaysian Undergraduate Students

Salwa Abdul Patah[a]*, Mohd Ferdaus Harun[b]

[a]*School of Human Resources Development and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia*

[b]*Department of Psychology, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*

*Corresponding author: salwaaf@utm.my

Abstract

One of the challenges impeding Malaysia's economic growth in 2024 is the condition of the global economy, which would raise the country's unemployment rate. There are generally 224,000 new graduates born in Malaysia every year, yet only 127,000 highly skilled jobs are available. This means that Malaysia produces an excessive number of university graduates. The shortage of job prospects will make it harder for the next graduates to find jobs. Hence, graduates from universities need to be psychologically ready to handle uncertain circumstances. Employers do believe that university graduates must acquire workplace resilience before beginning their careers. People perceive a resilient individual as tough, deserving of respect, and successful. Empirical evidence supports the claim that university students' emotional intelligence and social support play a major role in determining their resilience. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out the extent to which students' resilience correlated with social support and emotional intelligence at six Malaysian public universities. To collect data, we conducted a cross-sectional survey with 387 students. The results show a considerable positive correlation between resilience, emotional intelligence, and social support. This study demonstrates the potential influences of social support and emotional intelligence on the development of resilience in Malaysian undergraduate students. The unpredictable nature of the global economy signifies that changes in the university environments are inevitable. This study suggests that enhancing the university's general courses and co-curriculum module will foster students' willingness to take risks and increase their self-confidence, both of which will increase resilience.

Keywords: resilience, emotional intelligence, university students

Abstrak

Salah satu cabaran yang memberi impak kepada pertumbuhan ekonomi Malaysia pada tahun 2024 adalah keadaan ekonomi global, yang turut meningkatkan kadar pengangguran di negara ini. Secara amnya, terdapat 224,000 graduan baru di Malaysia setiap tahun, namun hanya 127,000 peluang pekerjaan berkemahiran tinggi wujud. Ini bermakna, Malaysia menghasilkan jumlah graduan universiti yang berlebihan. Kekurangan peluang pekerjaan akan menyukarkan graduan seterusnya mencari pekerjaan. Oleh itu, bakal graduan perlu bersedia dari segi psikologi untuk menghadapi keadaan yang tidak menentu ini. Majikan percaya bahawa graduan universiti perlu mempunyai kemahiran daya tahan di tempat kerja sebelum memulakan kerjaya mereka. Kajian mengaitkan individu yang mempunyia ketahanan diri sebagai seorang kental, dihormati, dan berjaya. Bukti empirikal menyokong dakwaan bahawa kecerdasan emosi memainkan peranan penting dalam menentukan ketahanan mahasiswa universiti. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti sejauh mana daya tahan mahasiswa dipengaruhi oleh kecerdasan emosi mereka. Kajian ini dijalankan di enam universiti awam di Malaysia. Data dikumpul secara tinjauan rentas dijalankan ke atas 387 orang mahasiswa. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan terdapat pengaruh positif antara daya tahan ke atas kecerdasan emosi. Kajian ini menunjukkan potensi kecerdasan emosi dalam membangukan daya tahan dalam kalangan mahasiswa di Malaysia. Persekitaran universiti perlu berubah untuk mempersiapkan mahasiswa menghadapi situasi ekonomi global yang tidak dapat diramalkan. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa meningkatkan kemahiran daya tahan dan kecerdasan emosi dijadikan modul dalam kursus umum di universiti.

Kata kunci: daya tahan, kecerdasan emosi, mahasiswa universiti

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

The labour market has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. 800,000 workers have lost their jobs by the end of 2020 (Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi & Luqman Arif Abd Karim, 2020). 2020 saw the highest youth unemployment rate since 2010, at 8.9%. A significant percentage of university graduates do not have work. To obtain jobs, university graduates are willing to work outside of their academic specialties. Their income does not correspond with their level of education either. Even worse, graduates from the B40 family had the highest unemployment rate (Hazwan Faisal Mohamad, 2020).

Furthermore, one of the challenges that may impede Malaysia's economic growth and raise the country's unemployment rate is the unpredictability of the global economy (Zaidi Simail, 2024). Only 127,000 highly skilled jobs are available annually, compared to an average of 224,000 graduates. Due to a lack of employment opportunities and Malaysia's oversupply of university graduates, the remaining over 90,000 graduates struggle to find work (Muhammad Saufi Hassan, 2024). The scenarios would have a significant impact on upcoming graduates. How would they handle the ambiguity of the situation?

Shaw (2020) asserts that resilience helps people get over emotions of powerlessness and uncertainty. Resilience is one of the top three skills that employers look for in graduates globally (CBI, 2019), highlighting how important it is for upcoming graduates to possess great resilience and be able to overcome adversity. In a similar view, Sant (2013) asserts that college students must empower themselves by developing resilience for their future careers. According to research, university students frequently experience negative emotional states of stress, anxiety, and depression (Pidgeon et al., 2014). Research has demonstrated that a lack of resilience contributes to mental health problems, which in turn cause suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and depression among students (DeRosier et al., 2013; Puthran et al., 2016). We expect university graduates to be psychologically prepared to face the unpredictable working world, so nurturing resilience in university students requires substantial consideration.

Findings from Malaysian studies shed light on the level of resilience among university students. Undergraduate students in public and private universities demonstrated a moderate level of resilience, characterized by factors such as social skills, problem-solving abilities, autonomy, optimism, humor, and spirituality (Norasmah, 2017). Another study, focusing on teenagers living in care facilities, also found moderate resilience (Noraini et al., 2019). Outside the Malaysian context, a study found that only one-third of the 150 Jordanian nursing students are resilient (Hamaideh et al., 2024). Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering resilience among Malaysian youth, underscoring the possibility of interventions and support systems to enhance resilience in educational settings.

While there are studies on resilience, social support, and emotional intelligence worldwide, there may be fewer studies that focus exclusively on undergraduate students in Malaysian public universities. The current study aims to examine the level of resilience among a sample of Malaysian undergraduate students. More specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify levels of resilience and emotional intelligence among undergraduate students.
2. Examine the relationships between resilience and emotional intelligence among undergraduate students.

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Importance of Resilience for University Students

Resilience plays a crucial role in overcoming obstacles in life, both internal and external. As defined by the American Psychological Association, resilience denotes the capacity to successfully adjust in the face of a variety of stressors, trauma, and danger. Studies like the one done by Masron Mensih et al. (2021) highlight the connection between resilience and traits like success, toughness, and self-worth. Furthermore, Barbe et al. (2021) and Resnick and Inguito (2011) provided empirical evidence that shows the significant influence of resilience on overall well-being, which includes both mental and physical health. Recent research by Barzilay et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of resilience in reducing psychological distress, as seen by increased rates of anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building resilience, then, becomes important for university students because resilience not only builds mental toughness but also promotes overall health.

Resilience, as described by White et al. (2010), is an individual's ability to dynamically manage their behaviour and adapt to their surroundings in the face of difficulty. This dual-faceted concept is not just a personal quality, but also an important society resource, facilitating stress management and health maintenance. The findings of Connor and Davidson (2003) and Ong et al. (2006) emphasize the relevance of resilience in promoting both individual well-being and collective society stability. Recognizing and cultivating resilience can thus help to promote adaptive behaviors among university students and ensure their robust responses to challenges in life. Stallman (2011) and Robertson et al. (2015) both emphasize that resilience is a flexible concept that can be developed through various techniques and interventions. According to this viewpoint, resilience is no longer seen as a fixed trait but rather as a skill that can be developed over time with practice and effort. Hence, through learning, students should be able to take proactive actions toward building their capacity to adapt in the face of life's obstacles after graduating.

2.2 Factors Contributing to Resiliency

Scholars in this area of study highlight the intertwining of the concept of resilience with social support. They underscore the significance of social resources in building resilience, including peer, family, and community support. For example, Ershadi et al. (2020) draw a comparison between resilience and social resources, highlighting the critical influence of family, friends, and community members' perceptions on an individual's capacity to overcome hardship. In a similar vein, Ungar (2012) calls on academics to incorporate the social component into resilience studies and highlights the complexity of social interactions across family, peer, and community settings. From a holistic standpoint, Bottrell (2009) claims that resilience is the result of people interacting with their social environment. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints emphasize how important it is to comprehend resilience in the larger framework of social relationships. Understanding the social aspect of resilience not only improves our understanding of the phenomenon but also emphasizes how crucial it is to create social networks that are supportive to promote resilience.

There is empirical evidence showing a considerable relationship between emotional intelligence and resilience (Barbe et al., 2021, Masron Mensih et al., 2021). The findings from multiple scholars and empirical studies emphasize the nature of emotional intelligence. Hasson (2014) emphasizes its importance in social interactions as well as in the workplace, while Goleman (1998) and Gardner (2000) provide complementary but different definitions, focusing on traits like enthusiasm, self-control, persistence, self-motivation, and the

capacity to control negative emotions. Promsri (2019) highlights how emotionally intelligent people think constructively when faced with challenges, which increases their resilience and improves their problem-solving skills.

Srinivasan (2015) and Estrada et al. (2021) offer empirical evidence in educational settings supporting the critical role emotional intelligence plays in students' development and academic success. They cite characteristics such as compassion and a strong commitment to learning as outcomes associated with high emotional intelligence. Goleman (1998) asserts that emotional intelligence significantly influences job performance in the workplace. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints demonstrate the profound effects of emotional intelligence on academic and personal growth. Furthermore, Nelson and Low (2003) point out that there is a clear correlation between social skills and emotional intelligence, emphasizing how easily people with high emotional intelligence can work together and cultivate positive relationships. Taken as a whole, these results highlight the many advantages of emotional intelligence, from improving problem-solving and resilience to promoting positive change. In summary, social support and emotional intelligence are influential in nurturing undergraduate student's resilience.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and Procedure

This descriptive-correlational, cross-sectional study looked at the association between social support, emotional intelligence, and resilience. We used convenience and snowball sampling techniques to gather data from a population of public university students in Peninsular Malaysia's central and southern zones. The study comprised 387 undergraduate students from six different public universities. From January to August 2023, we contacted respondents via WhatsApp and LinkedIn, both physically and online. We requested that respondents who consented to participate in this study click on a link to an online electronic survey (Google Forms).

3.2 Measures

We used the Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA) by Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, and Martinussen (2003) to assess resilience and social support. We assessed each item on a 7-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 "not at all" to 7 "very much." In the present study, the Cronbach alpha was 0.83 and 0.91 for resilience and social support, respectively. Paul Mohapel's Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment served as the source of the emotional intelligence measures. It has six items, with responses ranging from 1 "not at all" to 7 "very much." The Cronbach alpha was 0.78 in this study.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

The data was examined using IBM SPSS 29.0 software. This study omitted eight cases due to insufficient responses. Descriptive analyses were employed to describe sample characteristics and resilience levels. The relationships between the variables were measured using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

■4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Variables

The majority of respondents (74%) were between the ages of 21 and 25. More than half of them were female students (65%). Nearly half of the respondents (43%) had a CGPA greater than 3.50. One-quarter of respondents dedicate between two and nine hours per week to physical activity, such as walking or other sports. More than half engaged in non-academic activities on campus (62%). The descriptive analysis, defined by mean score and standard deviation, revealed the features of social support, emotional intelligence, and resilience. The mean score for emotional intelligence was 4.91 out of 7.00 (SD =.82), and resilience was 5.31 out of 7.00 (SD =.98).

4.2 Resilience, Social Support, and Emotional Intelligence

The overall mean score for resilience was 5.31 out of 7.00 (SD =.98), indicating a slightly high degree. Levels of emotional intelligence had overall mean scores of 3.39 out of 7.00 (SD = 1.00) and 4.91 out of 7.00 (SD = .82), respectively. The findings show that the majority of the respondents have a modest level of emotional intelligence. Correlation coefficients revealed two significant connections. There was a positive association between resilience and emotional intelligence (r = 0.56, p =.0001). The strength of both relationships was moderate (Table 1).

Table 1 Correlation among resilience and emotional intelligence

Variable	Resilience	Emotional Intelligence
Resilience	1	-
Emotional intelligence		0.558

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

■5.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Our findings suggest that the majority of the respondents had a slightly greater level of resilience. The results suggest that respondents have confidence in their abilities to succeed and overcome personal barriers. They have a basic understanding of what they want out of life. Despite their lack of strength, they feel they can succeed. Few studies have examined the overall level of resilience among university students. In general, the level of resilience observed in our study was somewhat stronger than found in past studies. For instance, Hamadeih et al. (2024) measured resilience among undergraduate nurses in Jordan and found that 34.0% of the 150 students were resilient (M = 71.61, SD = 15.71). Norasmah (2017) discovered that university students had a moderate level of resilience (M = 3.88, SD = 4.48). Noraini et al. (2019) examined resilience among 109 youth in three different care homes and found that only 25.7% demonstrated a high level of resilience. The majority of the youth demonstrated a moderate level of resilience, accounting for 68.8%. Although Noraini et al.'s study was done in the context of care homes, it provides insight into the resilience of the young generation in Malaysia.

The overall mean score for emotional intelligence was 4.91 (SD =1). The results indicate that the respondents had a moderate level of emotional intelligence. Specifically, the respondents are conscious of their emotions at any given time. Their patience allows them to channel their energy towards creative activities or hobbies. Additionally, they show concern for the well-being of others. This mix of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy suggests that the respondents' emotional intelligence is both balanced and modest.

In addition, our result has shown a positive correlation between resilience and emotional intelligence, our findings suggest that the higher the emotional intelligence, the better the respondents respond to internal and external difficulties. Previous research has also identified this link. For example, emotional intelligence was significantly correlated with resilience (r =.674, p < 0.01) in a sample of 124 undergraduate social worker students (Masron Mensih et al., 2021). Another study suggests that 277 undergraduate students with high emotional intelligence built up resilience, which, in turn, experienced reductions in perceived stress (Thomas & Zolkoski, 2020). One explanation is that highly emotional intelligence allows individuals to stay calm, think rationally, and make sound decisions. Furthermore, Estrada et al. (2021) argue that emotional intelligence assists a person in responding cognitively and behaviorally to problems. Hence, it would seem that these qualities enable the respondents to handle the challenges of their university life more efficiently, thereby increasing their resilience.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The study has certain drawbacks. The use of convenience sampling to collect data reduces the generalizability of the conclusions. This study provided results that are comparable to previous research. However, there is one limitation: the relationship between variable has not been examined using advanced statistical tests. This report makes various practical recommendations, particularly for the management of public universities. To begin, recent research shows that individuals' resilience can be boosted by both internal and environmental factors. If universities wish to increase their students' academic performance, they must recognize the value of emotional intelligence.

The university's management should provide programs and campaigns to help students become more aware of their own and others' emotions. The programs must also help students acquire effective coping strategies for a wide range of situations. Next, the university's management should broaden social support networks within the university community. This could include giving students more opportunities to connect with peers and faculty members to foster a sense of belonging and community. Finally, the faculties can incorporate emotional intelligence development into the current curriculum. This could mean introducing modules like emotional awareness, empathy, and interpersonal communication into existing curricula.

■6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the respondents to the present study showed moderate social support and emotional intelligence, but slightly greater resilience. The relationship between resilience, social support, and emotional intelligence highlights the role of social support and emotional intelligence in fostering resilience in undergraduate university students. As a result, it is vital to undertake programmes aimed at developing emotional intelligence among students. It is also critical to focus on social support, particularly from family members. Implementing the findings in the university's general courses or extracurricular activities allows Malaysian public universities to better support their students' overall development, preparing them for the uncertain working environment.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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