

COVID-19 Pandemic: The Psychological Adjustment of International Students in Malaysian Public Universities

Pandemik COVID-19: Penyesuaian Psikologi Pelajar Antarabangsa di Universiti Awam Malaysia

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Article progress

Received: 2 Oct 2024

Accepted: 9 April 2025

Published: 31 May 2025

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Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 disease has greatly affected one's psychological condition. At all COVID-19 times, International Students (IS) fragility puts them at a high risk affected group by COVID-19. However, throughout the COVID-19 period, only a few studies have been conducted on psychological experiences in the home country. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the psychological challenges that happen among international students during COVID-19 pandemic and the support that has been given to help their psychological adjustments. This qualitative research applied a purposive sampling method to investigate psychological adjustment at 6 public universities with the highest number of international students in their zone. Semi structured interviews have been conducted among ten international students and seven officers from the International Student Society (ISS). This research also used document analysis to triangulate and validate data. All data gathered has been analysed using thematic analysis with assistance from the CAQDAS software program (ATLAS.ti). Results gathered indicate that IS are dealing with loneliness, depression, frustration, hopelessness and stress. These psychological issues influence their feelings and behaviour. Nevertheless, universities are also providing services to assist IS during their adjustment period. Services provided such as virtual help desk, counselling service, regular contact with international students and mental awareness programs. Hence, further planning for suitable services and assistance should be made by authorities regarding adjustments during COVID-19 in Malaysia.

Keywords: COVID-19; psychological issues; psychological support; case studies

Abstrak: Wabak penyakit COVID-19 telah banyak menjejaskan keadaan psikologi seseorang. Pada semua masa COVID-19, kerapuhan Pelajar Antarabangsa (PA) meletakkan mereka pada kumpulan yang berisiko tinggi terjejas oleh COVID-19. Bagaimanapun, sepanjang tempoh COVID-19, hanya beberapa kajian telah dijalankan mengenai pengalaman psikologi di negara asal. Justeru, kajian ini dijalankan untuk meneroka cabaran psikologi yang berlaku dalam kalangan pelajar antarabangsa semasa pandemik COVID-19 dan sokongan yang telah diberikan untuk membantu penyesuaian psikologi mereka. Penyelidikan kualitatif ini menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan untuk menyiasat pelarasan psikologi di 6 universiti awam dengan bilangan pelajar antarabangsa tertinggi di zon mereka. Temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan dalam kalangan sepuluh pelajar antarabangsa dan tujuh pegawai daripada Persatuan Pelajar Antarabangsa (ISS). Penyelidikan ini juga menggunakan analisis dokumen untuk melakukan triangulasi dan

mengesahkan data. Semua data yang dikumpul telah dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik dengan bantuan daripada program perisian CAQDAS (ATLAS.ti). Keputusan yang dikumpul menunjukkan bahawa IS sedang berhadapan dengan kesunyian, kemurungan, kekecewaan, keputusan dan tekanan. Isu-isu psikologi ini mempengaruhi perasaan dan tingkah laku mereka. Namun begitu, universiti juga menyediakan perkhidmatan untuk membantu IS semasa tempoh penyesuaian mereka. Perkhidmatan yang disediakan seperti meja bantuan maya, perkhidmatan kaunseling, hubungan tetap dengan pelajar antarabangsa dan program kesedaran mental. Oleh itu, perancangan lanjut untuk perkhidmatan dan bantuan yang sesuai perlu dibuat oleh pihak berkuasa berhubung pelarasan semasa COVID-19 di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: COVID-19; isu psikologi; sokongan psikologi

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 disease has affected the whole world at all systems and levels. The latest statistics report the number of people infected with COVID-19 until September 2022 is 620,878,405 cases. From that count, 6,543,138 are reported dead (World Health Organization, 2022). This contagious disease has been spreading out vigorously starting December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Admitted patients to the hospitals increased dramatically. People die every day, kids are orphaned in a moment, people lose their family members, and a number of hospitals are filled with patients. It was a very hard time and negatively impacted not only on physical health but also emotion and psychology. People named the year 2020 - 2021 as a hardship year because of the COVID-19 effect (Bureau et al., 2022).

The uncertainty of the disease formed challenges that led to worries, panic, stress, anxiety, depression, and much other psychological distress in society during this pandemic of COVID-19 (Abdul Aziz et al., 2020; Hishamudin et al., 2020; Johar & Amat, 2020; Talha, 2020). Thus, studies have been done to understand the psychological distress among communities caused by COVID-19 (Abdul Aziz et al., 2020; Al Dhaheri et al., 2021; Cielo et al., 2021; KARATAŞ, 2020).

In addition, a similar impact was also experienced by the international student's (IS) population around the world, including IS who currently stay in Malaysia. Since they are leaving their country and staying in Malaysia during their study period, their existence and well-being are important to take care of. In fact, they might experience extra emotional pressure since they are alone, being far from their family, and might not yet familiar with the host country (Ahrari et al., 2019; Khosravi et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2018). Current studies exploring and discussing IS's psychological adjustment during COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia are limited (Ahmed & Mohamed, 2021; Michael et al., 2021; Sundarasan et al., 2020).

Literature Review

The COVID-19 outbreak, previously known as 2019-Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCov) started to spread at the end of December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Initially, it was believed that this virus transferred directly from animal to human through physical contact. However, World Health Organization (WHO) has underlined that this disease is mainly spread using air transmission by infected persons whether they develop symptoms or not. Symptoms that might be experienced by anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 are respiratory illnesses, fever, tiredness, chest pain, confusion, diarrhoea, and difficulty in breathing. Some patients might recover without treatment, while some others, especially high-risk groups like senior citizens, kids, pregnant women, cancer patients and obese people, might be seriously affected by COVID-19, which can lead to death (World Health Organization, 2022).

However, during the writing of this article, until October 2022, WHO confirmed that the virus COVID-19 was no longer a pandemic after going through a few stages of lockdown and getting various numbers of vaccines, most of country are now getting to the endemic phase of COVID-19, at least 70% of population in the country are completely vaccinated

with 100% rate of vaccination among health officers' sectors. The endemic phase refers to the situation where the COVID-19 virus is still present in the community, but the number of infections is at a stable rate.

Psychological Effect of COVID-19

It is understandable that the essential prevention steps such as physical distancing or isolation, lockdown order and the closing of public premises taken by the authorities, are effectively achieve the target of government to be free from COVID-19. This can be understood when the government report the declination rate of infected person every day. Ironically, the same prevention steps taken during COVID-19 also contribute negatively to psychological condition of a person. Psychological condition, as refer to Henriques, (2011) is defined as the study of mental behaviour and the human mind. Hence, in this study, psychological effect of COVID-19 referring to mental behaviour and human mind in facing COVID-19 phase.

A study by Eikhwan Ali & Mahirah A Rashid, (2020) reported that, COVID-19 does give negative impact, not only to COVID-19 patient, but to communities especially when their normal routine disrupted. An online survey among 2047 Malaysians found that, during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, people tend to feel very tired without reason, demotivated to do anything, feeling anxious to be outside, feeling lonely, feel disturbed with family members, having bad tempered, and not productive. All of this can be categorized as "pandemic fatigue" (Marziah et al., 2021) or "cabin fever" (Abdul Aziz et al., 2020). In fact, the scholars has already expected that the depression rate will be increase during MCO period reflecting to previous SARS and MERS epidemic (Moni et al., 2021).

In other way, it cannot be denied that students are also the most affected group due to COVID-19. Referring to latest research and articles, a constant finding reported that students all over the world are experienced physical and psychological distress as a response towards their academic changes. They are reported feeling severe depression, having deep level of anxiety, social isolation, stress, and which lead to lower performance in academic, no motivation to study, and physical illnesses (Alyoubi et al., 2021; Browning et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2020; Ghazawy et al., 2021; Rashid et al., 2021; Villani et al., 2021).

However, limited number of research has been found regarding psychological issues among IS during the period of COVID-19. In fact, their presence in the academic setting of our country is more or less as important as the local students itself. However, the group of IS has not been focused and cared for well during COVID-19 intervention since they are minority and local people tend to focus on their feelings and forget that they are in our country. Recent research regarding to IS's adjustment during COVID-19 phase are only limited to traditional countries such as United Kingdom, United States and Australia. (Cheung, 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Schartner & Wang, 2022; Xiong et al., 2022).

Other than that, the motivation to conduct this study also derived from the expectation that IS; especially whom are still in adjustment phase are described as vulnerable and in higher need of social support. In fact, scholars also mention in current research, the COVID-19 outbreak will terribly affect their condition since without COVID-19 situation, they are more likely to experience psychological issues compared to local students (Wilczewski et al., 2021; Yun Li et al., 2020). Thus, this derived the motivation of this study with objectives to investigate IS's psychological challenges during COVID-19 period, and to explore the role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues.

Psychological Effect of COVID-19 towards IS

IS who are staying in the host country during COVID-19 outbreak are more likely to not receive their psychological needs. Since they are small in numbers, people frequently overlook them (Cheung, 2020). For example, when the lockdown order is enforced, some campuses were closed without considering IS's needs like place of residence, meals, and safety due to the virus (Yun Li et al., 2020). During this time, societies tend to be prejudice towards IS, especially those who are coming from China or Asian continent. They also have been blamed spreading the virus (Ariel Lowrey, 2020; Yun Li, Juliet Honglei Chen et al., 2020). Other cause of their psychological distress are because of complicated travel restrictions, visa policy, and hotel payment that they need to pay during the quarantine period after arrival at host country (Cheung, 2020).

A study by Schartner & Wang, (2022) among 343 IS around UK found that, the pandemic of COVID-19 have badly

impacted their social and academic experience, in return it affected their psychological wellbeing. Since the beginning of COVID-19, IS rarely make any social contact with local due to social distancing. More than quarter of all participants are not satisfied with the social connection that they just made. This led them to feel very lonely during the COVID-19 period. With uncertainty of COVID-19 situation during the early year of 2020, they feel extra worried with their study plan, especially those who currently in their final year of study. About 55% participants agreed that they “extremely” or “very worried” about finding work after graduation and another 52% are worried about their academic performance.

In Poland, a study by Wilczewski et al., (2021) reported the psychological and academic effects of staying in host or home country during COVID-19 period among 357 IS from various background. The result shows that, there is no differences staying at host or home country. IS were reported feeling psychological distress and dissatisfaction. This is due to online academic setting that make them feel lonelier than usual. However, it is reported that, IS who returned to their home country have better academic adjustment than IS who stay in host country during COVID-19 situation because of the social support from the family and friends at their home country.

A constant result which affected their academic experience are also found in Malaysian university. Research conducted among 216 IS from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) reported, the sudden presence of COVID-19 does give impact to their study plan. From the survey conducted, six IS intended to defer their study and another six IS chosen to continue their study in different country. Even though majority of the participants (86%) are choose to stay and continue with their current program, IS at UNIMAS also reported having emotional issues due to COVID-19 and it has greater challenge than physical health care issue (Michael et al., 2021). This finding also aligned with research among 326 IS at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). It is found that they extremely experienced loneliness, stress and depression which affected their mental health condition during the COVID-19 period (Ahmed & Mohamed, 2021).

Psychological condition is very important aspect for a wellbeing of a person. In the study of international student's experience, other than academic and sociocultural adjustments, psychological adjustment will always be included in researches as point of reference or criteria of a good adjustment of IS (Ahrari et al., 2019; Lashari et al., 2018; Schartner, 2014; Syed Sahuri, 2018; Young et al., 2013). Hence, to understand IS's adjustment towards COVID-19 phase, psychological aspect must also include in the checklist. It is also expected that this research will capture their unique experience.

Role of University in Supporting IS Psychological Issues

University is found to be an important authority in the life of IS since their arrival in the host country. Since IS are all alone in the host country, university is expected to give support to IS. Chuah & Singh, (2016) underlined four categories of support towards IS which are in the form of emotional support, practical support, informational support and social companionship support. Recent research also reported that, better adjustment of IS in host country is associated with social support (Chuah & Singh, 2016; Hawkins, 2015; Lashari et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2004; Mohd.Yusoff et al., 2010; Pinamang et al., 2021; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2018; Yusoff & Othman, 2011). Since IS are registered students at the university, the institution would need to consider not just their academic success but also any factor that may have an impact on their general well-being, and this should be included with unexpected or emergency issue such as COVID-19.

Research towards the role of university in supporting IS in traditional host countries found that most of them are performing a vital role in supporting IS during that critical period. IS who are studying in United Kingdom (UK), mentioned that their universities are organizing online social activities or events from time to time to keep in touch with them. They also received guidance related to COVID-19 restrictions, online learning consultation and wellbeing support such as counselling session by university representatives (Schartner & Wang, 2022).

By understanding the importance of support towards IS especially during critical phase like COVID-19, current research regarding IS's adjustment towards COVID-19 also suggest the university administration to play their role well in order to support IS's wellbeing, as simple as send them out a regular email to inform the IS about online learning, virtual events and other service related (Alyoubi et al., 2021; Cheung, 2020; Ghazawy et al., 2021; Wilczewski et al., 2021).

Not only traditional host countries, but research also found that Malaysian university who served IS, did a proactive approach in supporting IS during COVID-19 phase. A survey among IS in UNIMAS reported that, the university keep

updated them with the latest information in academic and regulations of COVID-19 procedures. Additionally, they also received appropriate guidance and assurance from university while some others also mention about the support they received from the lecturers (Michael et al., 2021).

Although the impact of COVID-19 is no longer severe, the future remains uncertain. It is undeniable that a similar pandemic could occur again, possibly under even worse conditions. Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the challenges faced during such times and the support provided to IS, specifically in terms of psychological aspect. Previous studies also identified a research gap regarding the psychological support available to IS especially in Malaysian context (Ahmed & Mohamed, 2021; Michael et al., 2021; Sundarasan et al., 2020).

The study focuses on higher education institutions and their initiatives to assist IS, particularly in addressing stress, anxiety, isolation, and other psychological impacts. It analyzes university policies, counseling services, and other support mechanisms implemented during the pandemic. The research primarily gathers data through qualitative study method to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate IS's psychological challenges during COVID-19 period, and
2. To explore the role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted using multiple case study research design. Since the majority of research are carried out using a quantitative method (Ahmed & Mohamed, 2021; Al Dhaheri et al., 2021; Alyoubi et al., 2021; Chiara et al., 2021; Michael et al., 2021), it is necessary to explore and understand the actual state of IS throughout COVID-19 phase. Moreover, scholars agree that qualitative research design is specializing at obtaining the specific, practice, and experience of the subjects as they happen. It gives meaning to subjective experiences to explain the patterns and characteristics of interactions (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). According to Baxter & Jack, (2015), the evidence obtained by a multiple case study is solid and accountable. It is believed that the data collected would lead to unique findings with the use of a multiple case study research design.

Participants

The method of purposive sampling employed to construct the sample of the research. Using this method, participants were chosen based on their experience and expertise in IS's experience. Referring to Sharma, (2017), purposive sampling is effective in this situation because it gives the researcher with a wide choice of sample to choose from. On the other hand, it can also help researcher to come with a broad conclusion from the study. Hence, the targeted sample universities should have these characteristics: (1) a Malaysian public university; and (2) has the highest IS according to their zone. Thus, six public institutions consist in each zone, the Northern, Central, Eastern, Western, Southern, and Sabah and Sarawak zone have been selected for this study (Table 1).

In qualitative research, the number of participants is subjective. Subedi (2021) mentioned that the researcher is autonomous to select the number of participant samples in qualitative research upon the depth of the information required, depending on the research design and type of the study used. From 6 targeted universities, 3 participants will be selected consisting of IS and ISS Officers at each university. The selection of IS and ISS officers is based on their potential to answer the research questions (Table 2).

Twelve selected IS have been chosen according to the following characteristics: (1) Undergraduate IS, (2) and currently staying in the host country during the COVID-19 situation. In the other hand, the officers selected for this study are chosen based on their position in ISS as a resource person and that can provide information about IS adjustment experience.

Data Collection Method/Instrumentation

A document analysis and semi-structured interview are methods used to collect information for this study. Denzin, (1970) mentioned that as a type of triangulation, document analysis is frequently combined with other qualitative research techniques.

a. Semi structured Interview

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants: IS and officers of ISS using two ways: (i) face to face and (ii) online using Microsoft Teams platform. Participants were briefed regarding this study and asked for their consent before the session start.

b. Document Analysis

For document analysis, information related to COVID-19 guideline, information, procedure to IS were analysed. Other than that, list of activities conducted, photos and videos gathered from ISS website page and social media related to programs with IS during COVID-19 is also included to understand the role of university in supporting IS during COVID-19 situation.

Data Analysis Method

Data gathered analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis enables the researcher to see and understand collective or shared meanings and experiences by concentrating on the meaning across a data set. Following the approach outlined by Braun & Clarke, (2006), the data was initially familiarized by listening and reading persistently, followed by code generation, themes search, reviewing and report generation. ATLAS.ti software is used during the procedure to analyze data. The personal information of the participants was kept confidential.

Findings And Discussion

Results were discussed based on research questions. Codes and themes were generated to show the evidence of the themes.

Research Question 1: To investigate IS's psychological challenges during COVID-19 period.

Results indicate that participants are having five different psychological challenges during COVID-19: 1) loneliness, 2) depression, 3) frustrated, 4) hopelessness, and 5) stress. The theme, subthemes and codes are briefly described in Table 3

Loneliness

IS mentioned that they are feeling lonely. It is happening when the majority of local students return to their hometowns, and at that time, IS are the only group of students who are stranded on campus. This led them to feel lonely.

"But I think maybe I just face this loneliness feeling during the MCO. It is like most of my friends are going back to their country."

(Amir)

The other respondent from IS, Mary also said that she feels lonely because there are not many students on campus and the activities are also put on hold. She cannot even have the normal experience in her university life, like meeting with other students, joining physical activities and all. This restricted time led her to feel lonely.

"And that is great before the COVID. And I have a good view towards them (the university). But then since COVID happen, many students went back and some of them I cannot even meet. Then since there is not many students in university, and there is also less activity to do."

(Mary)

The ISS officer, Mr. Kay, also supported the statement:

"But now, majority of them (international students) are staying in their home country because of COVID. The class also happen online. And there might be less than 200 IS here in campus."
(Mr. Kay)

He also added:

"During the phase of COVID-19, I could say, the number of event or activities we arranged for them is limited. We do have programs, but not as much as usual time."
(Mr. Kay)

"And then, all of our programs, meetings, all are conducted online. Not face to face. But the feeling (loneliness) is getting better now."
(Amir)

With all limitations that they have, the ISS office, representing the university still trying their best to organize activities for IS. Of course, the number of programs is not as much as compared to the time before COVID and most of the activities are conducted online. However, some other universities are not organizing any activities at all, and everything was put on hold.

"2019 is the last year that we can organize all event together because that is just before the COVID. After that, when the COVID came, university did not organize the programs because everybody scared with the virus."
(Mr. Alif)

"Emm, no. I do not attend any because in that time, COVID just happen. So, all the activities that supposed to be happen were put on hold because of COVID."
(Wani)

"During the MCO and we cannot conduct a lot of programs since you know COVID was new thing for us."
(Amir)

It is not something that they can control because the lockdown command is also made to protect people lives by preventing social activities. Another respondent mention that, the loneliness feeling that they faced because they cannot communicate to anyone else. The security is very strict and not giving permission to outsiders to come inside and vice versa.

"If inside campus, the grab food also cannot reach us because the security guard didn't give the permission and I really feel so isolated during that time."
(Cynta)

Depression

IS also reported experiencing depression as an effect from the pandemic of COVID-19. The reasons are because they cannot go back to their home country and cannot socialize like before.

"But other than that, I have problem at the beginning of MCO. Not beginning but at the middle of MCO I feel quite depressed. Because I was planning to go back to my home and then suddenly there is COVID, and I need to cancel for my ticket and everything. Then I couldn't go back to see my parents for about one year and it is quite depressed."
(Muttaki)

"So, during the COVID situation, I knew some students who cannot go out and just stay by their room and since they are staying one person, so the situation can make them feel more depressed."
(Ahmed Salim)

The situation disrupted their earlier plan, used their money and expectation that they already made, bring them to the feeling of depression. And things that make it worst when they are staying alone, not meeting anyone else and restricted from doing social activities. The other participant, Cynta stated that she feels very frustrated with the COVID-19 situation. Due to immigration procedure, her passport has been held by the university management. As effect, she cannot go back to her home country like anyone else.

“So, during the COVID lockdown, most of local and international students are going back to their hometown and I am staying here, and the feeling was very frustrated. Everyone went away and it makes me frustrated. I cannot go back to my hometown because my visa is at the office and because of MCO, they hold my visa for about 8 months until Oct 2021 and after that, I can go back to Indonesia. Can you just imagine like I am staying alone? And maybe I am the only one Indonesian girl stays in campus during that time. And during that time, I feel like, why me, why me? (laughing).”

(Cynta)

Cynta also mention that the continuous lockdown with all uncertainties make her feel hopelessness.

“And I feel hopeless because of lockdown. And then repeat again lockdown. And the SOP also very strict, we cannot go anywhere. just stay in hostel. Because in our city also have been lockdown, so the immigration office was closed, it is also hard to get food supply. Everything becomes complicated and not easy because of COVID.”

(Cynta)

Another ISS Officer, Mrs Kather, also shared that the mandatory requirement of COVID-19 earlier screening that must be done by everyone is the reason of stress to some IS

“It is very stressful. You have to do a PCR test every now and then. Some people have been in quarantine for months. Because unfortunately, they were in this lock. So they have to keep on doing you know.”

(Mrs. Kather)

The data revealed that their psychological issues due to COVID-19 go beyond the surface. It not only affects their feelings, but also give impact to their behaviour. An ISS Officer, Mrs. Porsche share that some IS not attended their class because of stress while there is also an attempt to commit suicide.

“There is also some of them who are not attending their classes as schedule because of stress.”

(Mrs. Porsche)

“So, as an effect from that situation, there is also a suicidal attempt among IS.”

(Mrs. Porsche)

These findings demonstrated that IS does experience psychological challenges during COVID-19 period in term of feelings and behaviour. Among the most common reported challenges are loneliness and stress. Likewise, psychological distress also affected their behaviour which are: not attending class and suicidal attempt. The findings also found to be related and similar with other study as well. Majority of IS, regardless of their host country, are psychologically affected with the pandemic of COVID-19. The study about psychological effect of COVID-19 among IS in UK, US, Australia, Mainland China and South Korea, are showing the similar result (Alam et al., 2021; Chiara et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Schartner & Wang, 2022; Xiong et al., 2022; Xu, 2021).

Most of the students reported that they are experiencing psychological challenges during COVID-19 because of the COVID-19 virus and its procedure, the lockdown order, and the academic difficulties they faced. This is in line with study from Xu, (2021) which mention that, the psychological distress among IS during COVID-19 are influence by external and internal factors. Three identified external factors are (1) lockdown, (2) keeping social distancing and (3) social support. Apart from that, their psychological distress also influences by IS's values and behaviour which also categorized as internal factors.

Some of them are experiencing greater psychological challenges compare to others, but majority of them are still in a stable condition. Furthermore, even though it is reported that there is an attempt to commit suicide, however, their percentage is very small in number which only stated by one participant. This is aligned with another research stated that the most affected country with COVID-19 pandemics are resulted in higher percentage of psychological distress among IS such as IS who are staying in China compared to South Korea (Alam et al., 2021; Chiara et al., 2021; Xu, 2021).

Some of psychological distress such as anxiety, changing sleeping pattern, fear, and low wellbeing, that has been stated in the previous research, is not found in this research, it is believed that IS might slightly experience that condition but not stated during the interviews. This is so, because the current situation they faced resulted to panic, and confusion which make them cannot identify the actual feeling they face, while the story they shared are showing the symptoms. For example, the feeling of hopeless can also be defined as anxiety but mention as hopeless.

Research Question 2: To explore the role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues.

In accordance with findings for the first objective, it is found that, the universities are not leaving IS without guidance. In fact, universities are also playing their role in order to provide emotional needs for better psychological wellbeing of IS. The theme, subthemes and codes for the findings are briefly described in Table 4.

During the critical phase of COVID-19, universities does play their role in supporting IS. Not only limited to psychological support, but the support is general and suitable according to their current needs, for example the support in the form of welfare such as food, groceries, medication, financial and accommodation. Focusing to this study area, to help psychological issues of IS, they did give emotional support in the form of these 4 categories: 1) Virtual help desk, 2) Counselling service, 3) Contact with IS regularly, and 4) Mental awareness program.

Mr. Muhammad, one of ISS Officer mention that, in order to understand IS's needs closely, they did virtual help desk platform, so they can reach them in the time of their needs even though the physical office was closed due to COVID-19.

"And then when we had COVID, we did all staffs online every few weeks, and that all of them, whatever problems they have, we can let them talk."

(Mr. Muhammad)

The other respondents, both officers and IS also mentioned that they also have the same virtual service concept that only focus to counselling session. This virtual counselling service is organized by Student's Affair Division (HEP) at respective universities.

"So, in term of taking care of their mental health, we provide help to them. There is a counselling centre, where we also have expert counsellor at that centre and can help with their problems."

(Mrs. Sal)

"There is an online anonymous psychological session. And it was like you just register and then you just talk to them anonymously."

(Ahmad)

"I knew that there was a counselling centre there in campus."

(Wani)

"I went for counselling in counselling centre, and they told me to make myself busy, give time to myself and just relax with the situation and Alhamdulillah after that, I recovered."

(Muttaki)

This counselling service is available for them during COVID-19 period and one of the respondents from IS also shared that he has attended the provided counselling session by university, and it helps him to recover from psychological distress. Another ISS Officer, Mr. Kay also informed that they also personally approached IS, in order to know their current update from time to time.

“Yes, we do care about IS. Even during COVID, we keep contact each other, especially with IS who stay in campus, asking their needs, the food, and all. Probably I can say, we keep contacted with IS regularly to ensure their condition especially during the COVID-19 phase and at least this can help them from feel lonely.”

(Mr. Kay)

Other IS also revealed that their university are organizing awareness program regarding mental health to support their psychological wellbeing.

“Yes, there are a lot of programs that has been organized and related to psychology like mental awareness program, psychological therapy, a lot of them, and but I never join any of them because it is for mental health, and I think it didn't relate to me.”

(Ahmad)

A crucial component in helping IS to overcome psychological challenges during COVID-19 is by providing enough psychological support for IS. To help IS, this research found that all participated universities are providing a counselling session with expert for those IS who needed. Their help is very important since the rise in psychological issues are already predicted by scholars since the early period of the pandemic (Eikhwan Ali & Mahirah A Rashid, 2020).

The counselling session are found to be the most essential service and previous research also mention that counselling service is one of their initiative in order to help IS in their campus (Schartner & Wang, 2022; Xu, 2021). Other than that, research shows that universities are trying their best to keep contacted with IS and understand with their current situation. Some universities are providing a virtual helpdesk so that they can reach in time of need, even though the physical office is close, while some other university also initiate to contact personally with IS regularly. Regardless the method, their intention remains the same which is to keep connected with IS during this hard situation. Previous study found that, university used to send email regularly to IS to check on their condition during COVID-19 (Wilczewski et al., 2021).

Moreover, this research also found that universities also organize virtual program related to psychological support to help IS with better psychological wellbeing like mental awareness program. Since physical program are restricted during the pandemic of COVID-19, previous research found that most universities are still organizing social program but they are changing to the online mode (Schartner & Wang, 2022).

Conclusion

This research has been conducted with objectives to determine psychological challenges during COVID-19 among IS in Malaysia, and to explore the role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues. Finding shows that IS are experiencing 5 categories of psychological challenges during COVID-19 outbreak which are loneliness, depression, frustration, hopelessness, and stress. Findings also revealed that, COVID-19 not only affected their feelings, but also affected their behaviour such as not attending classes and suicidal attempts due to stress. However, all universities which participated in this research has been found providing psychological support towards IS in facing COVID-19 situation. They are providing virtual help desk, counselling service, mental awareness program, and contact with IS regularly to ensure their psychological conditions and wellbeing. Even though the psychological conditions of IS are reported still in acceptable condition compared to other countries, but the psychological support that has been organized for them are limited and still not systematic. Since they are categorized as vulnerable, detailed preparation should be made by the authorities, not only restricted during COVID-19 lockdown but also including post-COVID phase. This research cannot be generalized to all due to the fact that more than half of IS in Malaysia are studying in private universities. In addition, further studies should be done to discover the psychological condition of IS in Malaysia as general, and in other way, to understand the readiness of ISS whether in public or private universities. As aligned with the objective of Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE), Malaysia is preparing to receive and host until 250,000 of IS during the upcoming year of 2025. Hence, a good preparation should be made especially in facing the uncertainties situation like the pandemic of COVID-19.

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TABLE LISTS

Table 1: Selected universities according to zones

University	Zone	Current IS in Campus	Current Students in Campus
University A	Northern	2,451	31,587
University B	Central	3,356	32,142
University C	Eastern	848	12,411
University D	Western	6,476	30,870
University E	Southern	3,628	31,992
University F	Sabah & Sarawak	415	16,377

Table 2: Number of participants according to universities

University	IS	IS Officer	Total Participants
University A	2	1	3
University B	2	1	3
University C	2	1	3
University D	2	1	3
University E	2	1	3
University F	2	1	3

Table 3: Generated theme, subthemes, and codes for RQ 1: IS's psychological challenges during COVID-19

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Psychological challenges during COVID-19	Loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No friends ● No physical programs ● Feel isolated because of COVID-19 situation
	Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interstate border ● Cannot socialize
	Frustrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Left alone
	Hopeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feel hopeless due to continuous lockdown
	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stress with COVID requirement ● Suicidal attempt ● Not attend class

Table 4: Generated theme, subthemes, and codes for RQ 2: Role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues.

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Role of university in supporting IS's psychological issues	Emotional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Virtual help desk ● Counselling service ● Contact with IS regularly ● Mental awareness program