

# The Self-Perceived Problems among Malaysian Pre-university Students: Implications for College Counselling

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<http://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v16i3.11075>

*Received: 21 June 2020*

*Accepted: 30 September 2020*

*Date of Online publication: 20 October 2020*

*Published: 20 October 2020*

**Abstract:** This study investigates the self-perceived problems among Malaysian pre-university students in a public research university in Malaysia. A survey study using Mooney Problem Checklist of Measurement was conducted in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). A total of 278 pre-university students were selected using simple random sampling. Results indicated that the level of problems faced by pre-university students is low. The study found that the main problems faced by the pre-university college students are related to their future-vocational and educational, followed by adjustment to school work, personal-psychological relations, moral and religion, social-psychological relations, health and physical development, home and family, curriculum and teaching procedures, social and recreational activities, finance, living conditions and employment, and finally, courtship, sex and marriage issues. This study shows that there are major related problems faced by the students at the pre-university level. These findings highlight the importance of considering guidance and counseling services to assist pre-university students to ensure that these self-perceived problems will not affect their emotional and academic achievement. Implications of college counseling were discussed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Academic Issues, Career Adjustment, College Counselling, Pre-university Students, Self-perceived Problems

## 1. Introduction

College students encounter a wide range of problems, some of which fall within the students' mental health domain. Additionally, attending university or college can be a challenging experience for most of the new undergraduate students. Students are faced with new demands or challenges in the transition from highschool to college (Novel, Ajisuksmo, & Supriyantini, 2019). Specifically, a student's problems often fall in the mental health domain when they interfere with daily health and wellness and the

student experiences distress or difficulties in functioning in important areas of college adjustment (Schwitzer et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought not only the risk of death from infection but also unbearable psychological pressure. The continuous spread of the pandemic, strict isolation measures and delays in starting schools, colleges, and universities across the country are expected to influence the mental health of college students. There have been reports on the psychological impact of the pandemic on the general public, patients, medical staff, children and older adults (Cao et al., 2020). However, no detailed study on the mental health status of college students facing the COVID-19 pandemic has been conducted to date.

### **1.1 Self-Perceived Problems**

Many factors cause students to experience stress. The pressure that exists is due to the problems faced by the students. This can emerge for some students who demonstrate academic excellence at their school level but are unable to sustain their good performance at university. Furthermore, intense competition in the pursuit of academic excellence has created a backdrop of high pressure to students in realizing their vision. In addition, factors such as the environment, little career-related knowledge, interpersonal relations and students' embedded ways of thinking also contribute to students' pressure. A study by Othman (2001) mentioned that the university environment poses challenges to students when they are also faced with other problems. Examples of such arising issues include, academic problems, time management, self-adjustment to a new campus life, new teaching styles from lecturers which differ from the students' experiences at school, a different environment, workload and also communication problems between students and lecturers.

In the Malaysian education system, upon receiving their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), (equivalent to the O-level) results, there are several channels available for students to continue their education at the next level. Among them are certificate, diploma, and pre-university levels respectively (Form six, matriculation, foundation), or if the students want to continue studying abroad, they can pursue the Advanced Level (A-Level) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams. In the category of post-secondary education, the option is to pursue the form six tertiary level, or enter a matriculation or foundation program. Form six and matriculation programs are under the full supervision of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, while foundation programs are under the supervision of the university that offers the program.

In addition to being a place for students to continue their studies at a higher level, universities also play the role of producing high quality human capital. Through a number of policies that have been implemented by the government, such as the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, overseen by the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department-2010 and also the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) or MEB (HE) published by the Ministry of Education-2015, it is the responsibility of the particular university to produce students holistically, characterized by entrepreneurship skills and balanced attitude.

### **1.2 Self-perceived problems and college students**

As the university's aim is to produce a pool of students with high-quality human capital, the university should be aware that there are many challenges that students face. Therefore, the university needs to be prepared to help students within this challenging university environment. It has often been said that it is a stressful period for students when facing these challenges. Sometimes, this stress can become a positive force to motivate students in striving for success; however, this same stress can also affect some students negatively.

According to Sipon (2001), new students at universities often face a variety of problems associated with feeling uncomfortable in a new environment, activities during the orientation week, the different learning system compared to the school system, financial struggle, the struggle to complete assignments, anxiety towards exams and worrying about not getting a job after completing their studies. This shows that these challenges and obstacles are inevitable in the life of a student.

Against this context and as per the statement made by the previous Deputy Education Minister, Teo Nie Ching in Berita Harian Online on October 25, 2018, statistics of mental health problems remain high in Malaysia. In fact, a study predicted that mental illness will be the second major health problem after heart disease by 2020. In fact, the Berita Harian Online on May 3, 2018 report by Azma Nor Laila highlighted that stress is one of the chief contributors to students' mental problems. Among the things that lead to stress is the pressure for academic achievement, not being able to balance the curriculum with their studies, financial constraints in covering the cost of living at university, learning problems, family issues related to parental conflict, relationship problems including conflicts between room-mates and romantic relationship troubles.

Many studies have found that university students encounter challenges and difficulties, but no specific studies have yet been carried out on students at pre-university level. Therefore, this study can help in identifying the problems encountered among pre-university students. Thus, the objectives of this study are to identify the problems faced by students in pre-university programs, and to assess the differences between the levels of the problems based on gender.

## **2. Literature Review**

Nur Ayuni & Jamaluddin (2017) conducted a study of the problems faced by students in the undergraduate level at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. The sample consisted of 282 students from the Guidance and Counseling, Physical Education and Home Science programs, respectively. The study used the Mooney Problem Checklist and the results showed that Finance, living conditions and employment (mean score: 0.0746) was the most common problem faced by the undergraduate students. The second highest problem was related to Academic and Career issues (mean score: 0.0613), followed by the Social and recreational activities (mean score: 0.0544). If observed from the program, it can be said that Finance, living conditions and employment (score: 0.05) were the most common problems faced by students in the Bachelor of Education in School Guidance and Counseling Program, the second most frequently encountered was the Academic and Career (mean score: 0.0528), and the third most common problem is related to romantic/love and sexual related issues (mean score: 0.0519). For students of the Physical Education Studies program, Finance, living conditions and employment (score: 0.0794) were the most common problems cited, followed by the issue of Academic and Career (mean score: 0.0665), and the third highest problems were the adjustment to course work (mean score: 0.0613). For students of Home Science Studies Program, Finance, living conditions and employment (score: 0.0752) were the most frequent, followed by Moral and Religious issues (mean score: 0.0600) and Academic and Career issues (mean score: 0.0595). The study also found that the null hypothesis is not rejected because there was no significant difference in the mean scores between gender and undergraduate students, based on the program of study.

In addition, Mohd Effendi & Ahmad (2015) undertook a study comparing the challenges faced by students in seven polytechnics throughout Malaysia. A total of 252 polytechnic students were selected as samples. The instrument chosen was the Mooney Problem Checklist (MPCL), which contained 327 items. Data analysis was based on the framework of the Rasch measurement model that used the software WINSTEPS. The main challenge that these polytechnic students in Malaysia faced were varied according to the dimensions of the challenge. A total of three technical college students had a major challenge in the dimension of education that was PMKL (not allocated enough time to learn = 1.10 logits), PSIS (anxiety to examination = 1.25 logits) and PKB (anxiety towards examination = 1.64 logits). Students from two polytechnics had major challenges in the learning dimension of PIS (fear of failure in exams = 0.91 logits) and PSP (fear of failure in exams = 1.74 logits). Further, students from two polytechnics cited PNS, as dominant in the dimensions of career ("Afraid that I will not be able to get into institutions of higher learning" = 1.62 logits). Also, PKK was seen dominant in the dimensions of health ("dorm/house area are smelly" / "do not get fresh air" / "insufficient sunlight" = 0.94 logits).

Further, a study was done by Nurul Hidayah (2013) in relation to challenges of international students in the University Residential College, UTHM. The sample comprised 98 persons. The data

obtained were analyzed using the Rasch model approach, with Winstep software version 3.69. The study found that (i) social adjustment problems were seen as a dominant issue faced by international students with a mean measure 12:18 logit; (ii) the level of comfort of interaction among international students were at a moderate level with the mean score of 2.70; (iii) no significant differences between academic adjustment problems with the CPA; (iv) there was no significant difference between social adjustment problems with the CPA; (v) there was no significant difference between personal-emotional adjustment problems with the CPA; (vi) there was no significant difference between academic adjustment problems when compared with own country ; (vii) there was no significant difference between social adjustment problems when compared with own country ; (viii) there was a significant difference between personal-emotional adjustment problems when compared with own country .

Perez (2013) in his study at the College of Arts and Sciences, La Salle University, Ozamiz City, Philippines, used the measuring instrument, MPCL, to determine the most common problems faced by students in one of the colleges. A study conducted on a total of 80 students found that marriage and family problems (52.5%) were the most frequent problems faced by the students. This was followed by the issue of social relations (51.25%) and finance, living conditions and employment (50%). A survey was also undertaken by Siti Nur Haziratul (2012) to identify the factors of the learning environment, working environment, time and financial management that affect stress among part time students in an engineering course at the Politeknik Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah (PSA). A total of 105 respondents participated in the study, encompassing students of Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering. The results showed that the most dominant factor influencing stress among students were time management factor (mean 4:02), followed by financial factors (mean 3.69), overall learning environment (mean 3:03), and finally, the work environment (2.56). T-test showed no significant difference between the stress factors that affect stress based on gender and marital status.

Syed Mohamed Shafeq and Hairiza (2011) aimed to identify the problems and differences based on students' demography at Kolej Tun Razak, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor. A total of 385 students were selected randomly. The instrument used was a Checklist of Students Issues developed by Syed Shafeq (2008), which contains 232 items. The study found that the categories that were deemed as most problematic were the adjustments and future career (67.3%), followed by morality and religion (56.7%) and social and recreational activities (53.6%). Respondents were found to be less affected by financial, working and living conditions (35.9%), followed by curriculum and teaching procedures (34.8%) and health and physical growth (33.5%). Based on the analysis, it was found that the problem categories of respondents in terms of demographics (program of study, gender, race, academic qualifications, school stream) is the same, namely, reconciliation and future careers.

Masoumeh Alavi and Syed Mohamed Shafeq Mansor (2011) conducted a study on the post-graduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) using MPCL. The number of respondents was 135 international students. The results of this study found that international students at UTM had two (2) categories of the most troubling issues. These were social issues and entertainment (19%), and problems of curriculum and teaching procedures (12%). Hassan and Nurfarahiyah (2010) examined the categories of problems faced by international students and identified the major problems in terms of demographics (gender, age, religion and status). The study sample consisted of 135 students. The instrument used was the Mooney Problem Check List (MPCL). The results showed that the most challenging problems faced by the international students sampled were educational and future career (52.15%), followed by financial issues, conditions of life and work (43.11%) and problems of social activities and entertainment (42.70%). International students also faced the problem of Internet service, food, language and social relations with local students.

Hassan and Vaskalista (2010) identified the categories of problems faced by the students at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The number of respondents was 130 persons. The instrument used was the Mooney Problem Check List (MPCL). The results showed that the most challenging issues encountered by students were financial, working and living conditions (42.3%), adjustments to academic tasks (30.9%), while education and future careers held the same percentage with personal relationships and psychological (emotional) (21.5%). The less problematic issues faced by

students were households and families (8.9%), moral and religion (8.1%) and health and physical growth (4.9%).

Azizi, Zainab, Zeliha and Gooh (2014) examined the main issues affecting students' academic achievement in their PMR exams, and to identify the problem differences based on their demographics. The study involved 186 respondents using questionnaires translated from MPCL. The results showed that the problems faced by students in the secondary schools of Mersing were at a moderate level (mean = 3.20). Academic and career issues were the main problem area (mean = 3.82), and no significant gaps were traced from gender, race and locality of schools differences except that there was a difference in the rate of religious / moral problems based on race ( $p = 0.01 < \alpha = 0.05$ ), gender ( $p = 0.004 < \alpha = 0.05$ ) and location of the school ( $p = 0.002 < \alpha = 0.05$ ). This indicates that the form four secondary school students in Mersing need to be supported in terms of reducing their future – vocational and educational, and simultaneously, focus was needed in terms of their religious/moral issues categorized by their respective race and education level, in accordance to the locality of their schools.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Study design**

The study was conducted using a quantitative survey approach to obtain information and data. Descriptive analysis was aimed at describing an occurring current situation or phenomenon, since the researchers needed to first collect complete information and review the situational areas which have not been previously studied (Sidek, 2001).

#### **3.2 Location, Population and Sample**

The study was conducted at the Agricultural Science Foundation Centre (Asper), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The population in this study was 983 students of Asper. The sample size is determined by Krejcie and Morgan (1979) as cited in Sidek (2002), a sample size of 278 respondents.

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The data was collected using Mooney Problem Checklist (MPCL) created in 1950 by Ross L. Mooney and Leonad V. Gordon. The MPCL used in this study adopts the same MPCL applied by Ayuni and Jamaluddin (2017). The instrument consists of eleven dimensions, each with 20 items. This instrument measures problems faced by the respondents There are (1) health and physical development (HPD) 01 – 30; (2) finance, living conditions and employment (FLE) 31 – 60; (3) social and recreational activities (SRA) 61 – 90; (4) courtship, sex and marriage (CSM) 91 – 117; (5) social – psychological relations (SPR) 118 – 147; (6) personal – psychological relations (PPR) 148 – 177; (7) morals and religion (MR) 178 – 207; (8) home and family (HF) 208 – 237; (9) future – vocational and educational (FVE) 238 – 267; (10) adjustment to school work (ASW) 268 – 297; (11) curriculum and teaching procedures (CTP) 298 – 327. The reliability value of this instrument is high, standing at 0.87. The responses of all items in the constructs are polytomous using the 3-point Likert-type scale. The study also changed the scale of measurement of the frequency of the problems 1 and 2 from the original instrument to use the three-point Likert scale of Does not interfere at all (0), Does not interfere (1) and Absolutely interferes (2). Conversion to the Likert scale is not a problem because MPCL is not intended to produce scores to make inferences, but it is intended to detect the types of main problems (Mooney & Gordon 1950). Researchers in many previous studies have used MPCL (Azeem & Nadawiyya, 2012; Susila, 2005; Syed Mohamed Shafeq & Hairiza, 2011).

The collected data in this study was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), applying two methods i.e. descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis was conducted to answer the research objectives, namely, to see the level and ranking of problems. Additionally, inferential analysis was used to compare the level of self-perceived problems between genders

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Overall and categorical levels of student perceived problems

The results of the descriptive statistics of both the overall and categorical level of perceived problems among the samples of pre-university students, in Table 1 showed that the total overall score of students (n=278) averaged at 150.78 (SD=88.03). This indicates that the problems faced by the respondents are at a low level based on the score range 0-220. Also, Table 1 showed that the highest mean of categorical level of perceived problems belonged to FVE (n=278) averaged at 17.56 (SD=10.17) and the totality is low, based on the score range of 0 - 20.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics result for perceived problems in overall and categorical levels

	Overall	HPD	FLE	SRA	CSM	SPR	PPR	MR	HF	FVE	ASW	CTP
N.	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278
Mean	150.78	13.23	11.62	11.89	9.45	13.75	14.95	14.83	13.2 0	17.56	17.48	12.82
SD.	88.03	8.38	7.85	7.98	7.98	9.51	10.01	9.80	10.2 7	10.17	11.10	10.03
Min.	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Max	366.00	36.00	33.00	38.00	37.00	37.00	40.00	37.00	39.0 0	40.00	40.00	40.00

N=278, \* Problem Level Scores Rating - Low (0 - 20), Medium (21-40), High (41-60)

### 4.2 Level of perceived problems, Gender-based

Table 2 revealed the descriptive statistics results of overall and categorical level of students' perceived problems based on their genders. The total overall score of perceived problems by male (n=95) and female (n=193) averaged at 150.64 (SD=85.94) and 150.86 (SD=89.32), respectively. The ASW has the highest mean of problem levels for male with an average of 16.61 (SD= 10.32), while the other highest problem level for the male respondents were FVE (M=16.18, SD=9.28) and MR (M=14.67, SD=9.55). On the other hand, for female respondents, the highest level belonged to FVE (M= 18.28, SD= 10.55), ASW (M=17.93, SD=11.48), PPR (M=15.62, SD=10.03), respectively.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics result for level of perceived problems, gender-based

	Gender	Overall levels	HPD	FLE	SRA	CSM	SPR	PPR	MR	HF	FVE	ASW	CTP
N.	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278	278
Mean	Male	150.64	13.17	12.23	12.95	11.34	13.60	13.66	14.67	13.34	16.18	16.61	12.89
	Female	150.86	13.26	11.31	11.34	8.48	13.83	15.62	14.91	13.13	18.28	17.93	12.78
SD	Male	85.94	8.18	7.67	8.58	8.78	9.65	9.90	9.55	10.13	9.28	10.32	9.29
	Female	89.32	8.51	7.94	7.62	7.38	9.47	10.03	9.95	10.36	10.55	11.48	10.41

N=278

\* Problem level score – Low (0-220), Medium (221-440), High (441-660)

\*Problem level score Values -Low (0 – 20), Medium (21-40), High (41-60)

### 4.3 Ranking level of problems, category-based & Gender-based

As per the research objectives, Table 3 shows the ranking of problems faced by the students in terms of category and gender. The highest ranking belongs to CSM (Ranking category based= 11). This finding was similar for both male and female respondents.

**Table 3.** Ranking Levels of Problem, Category-based & Gender-based

		HP D	FLE	SR A	CS M	SPR	PPR	MR	HF	FV E	AS W	CT P
Ranking category-based		6	10	9	11	5	3	4	7	1	2	8
Ranking Gender-based	Male	7	10	8	11	5	4	3	6	2	1	9
	Female	16	10	9	11	5	3	4	7	1	2	8

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Discussion on overall and categorical levels of student perceived problems

To date, there has been little discussion on the evaluation of the major problems faced by students pursuing pre-university level education. Previous studies focused mainly on the samples of secondary school students, students who were pursuing their diploma and bachelor's degrees. This current study has found that the level of overall problems encountered by 213 students (76.6%) is at a low level, while 65 respondents (23.4%) reported moderate levels. The mean score for the overall level of problems faced by students is 150.78, a relatively low level. In addition, the study also looked at the sub-categories of problems faced by the students. The results showed that the mean of all sub-categories of problems at the lowest level is between 9:45 to 17:56.

For the category of health and physical development (HPD), the mean is 13:23. The study found that among the issues that often interfere with students' physical health include being quickly fatigued ( $M = 0.982$ ), headaches ( $M = 0.94$ ), and susceptibility to illness ( $M = 0.91$ ). This may be caused by heavy lecture schedules. It could be that the students have class schedules throughout the whole day, every day, from Monday to Friday. It could be that they only have breaks in between classes and on weekends, and that too, if they are not required to be involved in other activities at their respective residential colleges. These factors combined create a lack of rest for students and may lead to health issues.

Another subcategory relates to finance, living conditions and employment (FL) which revealed a mean of 11.62. The themes within this subcategory include, "having no choice but to seek financial assistance from parents" ( $M = 0.89$ ), "the lack of knowledge in spending wisely" ( $M = 0.85$ ), and "not having fixed expenses" ( $M = 0.73$ ). Although deserving students are granted scholarships, the amount is often insufficient, forcing the students to seek help from their parents. The inability to spend wisely must also be taken into account, where the students are not equipped with knowledge on how to properly manage their money, or the insufficiency of money, or it could be that students waste their money on unimportant stuff. Regarding social and recreational activities (SRA), the study found that the mean for the problem is 11.89. Among the problems faced by students is, the lack of opportunity "to do what you love" ( $M = 0.7878$ ), "very little chance to get out and enjoy nature" ( $M = 0.723$ ), and "very little time to play sports" ( $M = 0.6942$ ). This is also likely to be associated with the packed lecture schedule as stated earlier in the health and physical problem category.

For the category of courtship, sex and marriage (CSM), the mean shown is at 9.45. Some of the most frequently cited issues observed under this category include: the fear of losing a loved one (i.e. romantic partner), with a mean of 1.018, being in love with someone who did not reciprocate (mean =

0.6511), and the struggle to build healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex (mean = 0.5683). While having romantic relationships was considered a norm amongst them, the fear of a break-up or loss of a loved one negatively affected the students, especially in their academic performance. Asyraf (2006) stated that, 60% of the female students who reported a decline in their academic performance attributed the cause to their preoccupation with lustful and sexual thoughts, instead of focusing on their course subjects,

Next is the sub-category of social-psychological relations problems (SPR), with a mean of 13.75. In this sub-category, problems faced by students are “hurting the feelings of others” (0.8957), “lacking the ability to lead” (0.7878) and “being teased by people” (0.777). To overcome the problems associated with hurting the feelings of others and being teased by others, they need to learn assertiveness skills. Assertive skills include the ability to express feelings, needs and opinions in an honest and open manner, to achieve excellence without jeopardizing the rights of others and achieving something which results in fulfilment in oneself and others (Francis & Babu, 2019).

For the category of personal – psychological relations (PPR), the mean is 14.95. Among the problems faced by students is laziness (M = 1.0180, forgetfulness (M = 0.9568), and fear (0.8525). In connection with this problem, one of the aspects which need to be enhanced by the students is, to improve the attitude of diligence, particularly in connection with the role of a student such as studying and not delaying until the last minute, and consistent revision. Indirectly, these positive attitudes help students to improve their memory and reduce feelings of anxiety related to academic matters.

The study found that the mean for the category of moral and religion (MR) is 14.83. In this sub-category, the problems faced by students are, “the fear of God's punishment” (M = 0.9424), “pornography material and obscenities” (M = 0.9281) and “inability to forget one's past sins” (M= 0.9281).

In connection with the issue of home and family (HF), the mean level of the problem is 13:20. Among the problems faced by students in the category is going against parents' advice (M = 0.8705) “feeling of no family” (0.8345) and the tragedy of the death of a family member (0.8309). In this case, family problems can also affect a student's academic achievement as demonstrated in a study by Tengku, Fatin, & Nabilah (2011) and Roslan, Ahmad, Nabilla, & Ghiami, (2017 which found that the relationship with the family is linked with academic achievement.

Next is the category of future-vocational and educational (FVE) with a mean of 17:56. In this sub category, problems faced by the students are “afraid of becoming unemployed” (mean = 1.1439), “fear of getting low CGPA” (min = 1.0396), and “the fear of failing at the university” (mean = 1.0288). According to Francis Bindhia K. & Babu (2019), Norliana Hashim, et al., (2016) and Asmah (2012), the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 explained that the most common problems identified by employers on graduates are “weak in English” (55.8%), “poor attitude and personality” (37.4%), “unrealistic wages/benefit” (33%), “the mismatch of skills” (30.2%), “too selective when looking for a job” (27.7%), “inability to solve problems” (25.9%) and “low in-depth knowledge” (23.8%). These findings can help students realize that their academic results/CGPA is not the only criterion in securing jobs but includes other aspects as well.

For the category of adjustment to school work (ASW), the mean derived is 17:48. Problems that afflict students include, being worried about their grades in each course (1.0899), getting low grades (1.0827), and fear of examinations (1.0612). This becomes a problem because academic results or good grades play an important role in securing a place for bachelor's degree level. Getting high grades increases the probability and opportunity for students to secure a course of their interest.

The next category is the problem of curriculum and teaching procedures (CTP) with a mean of 12.82. The problem often faced by students in this category includes, “the problem of reference books that are too difficult to understand” (0.8165), “extreme difficulty in comprehending teaching methods” (0.7662) and “too many assignments are required in some courses” (0.759). In this case, it was found that both students and lecturers play an important role. For example, on the issue of reference books that are too difficult to understand, the solution is to refer to the lecturer on matters not understood. In addition, students also need to understand that the assignment is given to increase the level of knowledge on the subject. As per the role of the lecturer, it is recommended that lecturers review the level of understanding of students on lessons which have been taught to gauge students' level of understanding. Lecturers are also encouraged

to consider students' commitments and negotiate a middle ground. In conclusion, although all the categories of problems faced by students are at a low level, it is advisable that all parties collaborate to ensure that the level of problems remain at a low level and that they do not escalate. The root causes of problems that have been identified should be dealt with to enable prevention. In counselling activities, implementation is usually a prevention, growth and remedial measure as well.

## **5.2 Discussion on ranking level of problems**

The study found that problems that most often interfere with the students are the problem of academic and career (FVE) (M = 17:56), secondly, the issue of work adjustment (ASW) (min = 17:48), thirdly, the problem of personal psychological (PPR) (M = 14.95), followed by the moral and religious problem (MR) (M = 14.83), the problem of social – psychological relations (M = 13.75), health and physical development (M = 13:23), home and family (HF) (M = 13:20), the problem of curriculum and teaching procedures (M = 12.82), social and entertainment issue (M = 11.89), finance, living conditions and employment (FLE) (M = 11.62), and finally the issue of marriage and sexually related problems (CSM)(M = 9:45).

Researchers have not found any sample of a previous study which dealt with foundation students. Nevertheless, there are previous studies dealing with the problems faced by students at Bachelor and diploma levels.

The three main problems found from the survey are FVE, ASW, and PPR. These findings are also among the main problems faced by students as shown by results of previous studies conducted by (Nur Ayuni & Jamaluddin, 2017; Mohd Effendi et al., 2015; Syed Mohamed Shafeq & Hairiza, 2011; Christina & Irwan, 2010; Hassan & Nurfarahiyah, 2010; Hassan & Vaskalista, 2010; Nor Elizma, 2016; Anu Yazid, 2015; Azizi et al., 2014; Goroshit, 2018)

In addition, this study also looked at the ranking of issues by gender. The study found that there are differences based on gender issues as per the ranking of problems. The problems that often interfere with boys are the problem of work adjustment (ASW) (M = 16.61), the second being academic and career problems (mean = 16:18), the third, the morality and religion problem (mean = 14.67).

However, the most recurring problems associated with the girls are academic and career (mean = 18:28), followed by adjustment of work (mean = 17.93), and finally, personal psychological problem (mean = 15.62).

It is worth noting the issues faced in each category of problems. The findings of the study showed that there are similarities and differences in the issues that often interfere with the students based on gender, as described below.

For categories of health and physical development (HPD), the main problems faced by boys are susceptibility to contracting disease, feeling dizzy and catching colds. As for the girls, among the main problems faced is tiredness, headache and not getting sufficient sleep.

In the category of finance, living conditions and employment (FLE), the main problems faced by the boys sampled are, not knowing how to use money wisely, having to ask for money from their parents and needing money to continue their education. For female students, the problems most cited are, not knowing how to use money wisely, having to ask for money from their parents and not having a fixed fund for expenditure.

For the category of social and recreational activities (SRA), the study found the problems that most often interfere with male students are not having enough time to have fun, being careless with clothes and belongings, and having too little opportunity to pursue activities they enjoy. On the other hand, the girls cited that they want more time for themselves, more time for sports and more opportunity to pursue activities they enjoy.

For the category of courtship, sex and marriage (CSM), among the main problems faced by boys are, having difficulty to build a friendly relationship with a friend of the opposite sex, being in love with persons who do not reciprocate mutual feelings, and the fear of losing a loved one. The girls cited struggles

in discussing sexual topics, factors such as loving persons who do not love them in return and the fear of losing a loved one.

In the category of social – psychological relations problems (SPR), the main problems faced by boys are hurting people's feelings, the lack of ability to lead, and feeling timid and shy. For the girls, the fear of hurting people's feelings, being teased by others and becoming too easily embarrassed were cited.

For the category of personal – psychological relations (PPR), the study found that there are similarities between the problems that often affect the male and female students such as traits of laziness, forgetfulness and worry. For the category of moral and religious issues, some of the main problems faced by boys are dealing with obscenities and obsession with pornographic materials, the fear of God's retribution, and uttering lies albeit without the intention to do so. Female students similarly cited the main problem of having to deal with obscenities and pornographic materials, unable to forget past sins, and the fear of God's retribution.

With regards to the findings on home and family (HF), the main ones cited by the boys were “talking against parents”, “not happy with mom and dad”, and “feeling of having no family”. For the girls, the major problems mentioned were “too many parents make sacrifices”, “against parent”, and the “tragedy of death in the family”.

For the category of future – vocational and educational (FVE), problems that often afflict the boys are, fear of unemployment, feeling skeptical about executing a good task, and not knowing how to look for work. On the other hand, the girls fear failure at the university, failure generally, scoring a low CGPA, and unemployment. As for adjustment to school work (ASW), the study found that there are similarities between the problems that often interfere with the male and female students such as being worried about grades in each course, getting low grades, and feeling worried about exams. For the category of curriculum and teaching procedures (CTP), problems cited by the boys include, “grade is not suitable as a measure of the ability”, “the test is unfair”, and “the universities are not well regulated”. For the girls, “reference books are too difficult to understand”, “lecturers too elusive” and “too much work is required in some courses” were cited as the main issues they faced

In conclusion, these findings can contribute to the search of actual solutions for problems faced by the students. Although the overarching theme may appear similar, there are differences in the issues faced. These findings also support the view of personality differences that exist within gender-related problems.

## **6. Implication on College Counselling**

Our results have implications for higher education professionals generally, academic support staff, and counselling center staff. First, it seems clearer from our findings of counselling outcomes on GPA that when campus professionals in various roles believe a student might be experiencing academic roadblocks stemming from disruptive or distressing problems falling within the mental health domain, they should actively pursue referrals to the counselling center. More specifically, because our overall findings suggest the negative academic implications for psychologically high-risk students and students with the already entrenched GPAs over the long haul to college graduation, such students should be targeted. For institutions, this may mean increasing efforts to encourage students with psychologically high-risk backgrounds or academically high-risk track records to disclose their needs early on in their institutional life to disability services, the campus counselor, or similar services. It also might mean offering more opportunities for early assessment and evaluation at first-year programming, orientations, and advising fairs. It seems clear that earlier identification and more extensive early efforts to connect students with support is needed to address the barrier of well-established academic problems that can develop over time from college student mental health needs.

Consequently, it is perhaps beneficial to administer the MPCL subscale at new-student orientations. College counsellors can use the results to guide the content area(s) of awareness initiatives for increasing students' knowledge of warning signs for mental distress. However, logistically, surveying all incoming students at orientation may be challenging due to COVID-19 pandemic. Many online survey platforms might make distribution more feasible by allowing the administration of UPM use of a cellular device and

a quick response (QR) code for accessing the questionnaire at various locations during new-student orientations.

## 7. Conclusion

The study has succeeded in identifying and ranking the problems faced by pre-university students (Achour et al., 2015; Asmah, 2012; Gading, 2020). With that, various parties, particularly the university can use these findings as a guide in the conduct of its planned daily activities at their respective levels. Results of this study can help the Guidance and Counselling Division in planning activities or interventions needed by foundation level students with the aim of helping the students. The findings will help the University (such as the Academic Division, Division of Student Affairs, the Counselling Department, Foundation Centre, Zakat Centre, University Residential Colleges, Financial Department) to improve the quality of their services to help foundation students so that the problems they face will not detrimentally affect their emotions and academic achievements. Although the findings indicated that the level of the problem is still low, nonetheless, as a precautionary measure, the findings should help lecturers to revisit and improve the quality of their teaching and indirectly improve students' understanding of the subject taught. In addition to the quality of teaching, distribution of assignments needs to be mutually discussed and negotiated. Indeed, the assignments meant to increase students' understanding must also be seen as a burden faced by students. In short, due to COVID-19 changes, a quick response (QR) code for accessing the questionnaire at various locations during new-student orientations is needed.

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