

Determinants of Psychological Well-Being in Civilian and Military Universities

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Abstract

This article examines the key determinants influencing psychological well-being among students in both types of institutions by synthesizing findings from empirical research published in peer-reviewed academic journals. The comparative perspective adopted here aims to illuminate shared challenges as well as the psychosocial specificities of military higher education. Understanding these patterns is particularly relevant in contexts such as the Czech Republic, where military universities operate under the authority of the Ministry of Defence and follow unique structural, educational, and professional mandates. By integrating existing evidence, the article seeks to inform more effective, context-sensitive mental health strategies within both civilian and military academic settings.

KEY WORDS: stressors, mental health determinants, well-being, military higher education, University of Defence.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays a worldwide interest is mental health and well-being due to rapid socioeconomic change, technological advancements, and lifestyle shifts. These trends have significantly impacted individuals' psychological health [1]. These broad societal trends must also be addressed within the specific framework of higher education, as they significantly affect students in both civilian and military institutions. The prioritization of student well-being within higher education reflects a growing recognition of the symbiotic relationship between psychological health and academic achievement. As students navigate the critical transition into university life, a period defined by heightened intellectual demands and significant personal evolution, they often encounter substantial psychological strain. Recent empirical data underscore the severity of this issue, revealing that approximately half of the student population suffers from elevated stress, with a significant number meeting the diagnostic criteria for formal mental health disorders [2]. According to Seligman, well-being represents a cornerstone of positive psychology, aiming to identify and cultivate a student's strengths rather than merely addressing their deficits [3, 4].

Within the higher education environment, this quality of life is measured through students' capacity to experience positive emotions, maintain effective psychological functioning under pressure, and establish functional social bonds. While the original theory of happiness targeted general life satisfaction, the modern concept of well-being emphasizes the process of optimal flourishing. This enables students not only to endure exam periods or military drills but to truly achieve professional and personal growth within these specific conditions [3, 29].

The concept of well-being can also be described as a subjective reflection on one's own experiences and the perception of both one and the surrounding world. The original foundation of this phenomenon was primarily rooted in a psychological perspective [5]. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the determinants of psychological well-being among students at civilian and military universities, focusing on the influence of specific academic environments on the mental health of young adults. This study employs a structured literature review approach to identify, analyse, and synthesize empirical research on mental health determinants among students in civilian and military universities. The review focused on peer-reviewed academic journal articles published over the last two decades and written in English.

Search terms included “psychological well-being,” “university students,” “military education,” “stress,” “anxiety,” “depression,” and “burnout.” Psychological well-being is not merely a subjective feeling of satisfaction; it represents a key determinant of cognitive performance, academic persistence, and the overall capacity of students to effectively meet the demands of the higher education environment.

2. Stress factors of universities study

Student well-being is determined by a multi-layered interplay of personal, academic, and environmental factors, making it a critical area of study for improving institutional support. Even within the higher education environment, it is inevitable that students encounter varying degrees of stress and its negative effects. When seeking solutions for stress regulation among military students, it is essential to consider their ability to perceive their surroundings, communicate effectively, and respond to changes and challenges arising in interpersonal relationships. Studies at the University of Defence are unique due to the overall organization of student life and a strong emphasis on mandatory group activities, in contrast to civilian education. On their path toward an academic degree, students face numerous obstacles that can induce stress.

First-year university students come from various types of secondary schools, both state and private. Within their secondary education, in accordance with the Framework Education Program Czech Republic, they should have acquired key competencies intended to facilitate their adaptation to university life [6]. However, secondary school graduates achieve varying levels of proficiency in these competencies, and difficulties may arise when dealing with the new tasks and challenges that university presents. Students enter an environment where places increased demands on them; they are often away from home for the first time, must organize their own time, manage their finances, and cope with academic requirements. All of this increases the pressure to take full responsibility for their studies. This primarily concerns the ability to search for, process, and evaluate information mediated through various information channels (websites, internal university systems, social networks, books, scholarly articles, lectures, seminars, etc.).

A student transitions to a different study and learning schedule compared to secondary school; therefore, it is crucial that they can effectively set up their own time management when planning their studies and preparing for credit tests and exams. The daily routine at university changes significantly from that of secondary school, which can lead to a loss of order and discipline. Compared to secondary school, it is easy to leave obligations until the last minute. Throughout the semester, it is necessary to complete term papers and partial assignments; if a student procrastinates, these tasks can accumulate before the exam period and become a barrier to fulfilling all requirements. Underestimating the time commitment or poor scheduling can easily lead to failure in meeting university obligations. All these aspects can create a significant burden and reduce the chances of successfully continuing one's studies [7].

The psychological well-being of students and the skills they have acquired to help manage stressful situations are also important aspects. According to Janoušková, the level of stress a student experiences during the exam period plays a significant role. If individuals set excessively high standards for themselves, thereby creating extreme pressure, their stress levels can escalate even further. It is crucial for individuals to work on their self-confidence and to be able to assess their own strengths and weaknesses [7].

The second area consists of the military specifics inherent to studying at the University of Defence. Joining the army represents a significant psychological turning point for young individuals. They find themselves in a new environment that imposes unusual and demanding requirements, fundamentally changing their previous way of life. First and foremost, it must be noted that the commencement of studies is contingent upon completing basic training in Vyškov, conducted in a continuous training regime. During the training, candidates are divided into training platoons according to a predetermined key and subsequently accommodated in barracks. The structure of the day is strictly defined by a daily schedule where all time is structured. This leads to a limitation of personal free time and the opportunity to be alone, which is a completely unique experience for many students. The absence of privacy and individuality constitutes a major burden.

Within a military unit, emphasis is placed primarily on the results and performance of the particular platoon. Currently, while the general population emphasizes individuality and personal needs, these are denied for a certain period during training. Following the successful completion of basic training, students are accommodated at the university in a manner like their time in Vyškov. They study a unified degree program, and for the subsequent selection of a specific specialization, students are assigned in their second year based on University of Defence regulations. This process considers academic performance, physical fitness, voluntary research activities, and other factors.

The organization of classes at the University of Defence is standardly designed from Monday to Friday, usually between 8:00 and 16:00, with classes occasionally held at later hours. Attendance at both lectures and seminars is mandatory for military students. Unlike at civilian universities, all requirements within a given semester must be fulfilled; there is no option to retake subjects later. As part of their studies, students also fulfill military duties, such as the morning roll call, uniform inspections, alcohol testing, and general presence checks in the barracks. A significant aspect of the studies is the requirement to wear a standardized military uniform according to regulations; strict hairstyle requirements for both men and women represent a major first test for every individual. Regarding dress code, it is strictly determined which uniform must be worn for classes and whether sleeves should be rolled down or up; this can be demanding given the varying levels of personal temperature tolerance in the classroom. Military training takes place once a week after regular classes in the barracks, representing an additional obligation beyond the scope of standard academic studies.

Within the university, students are also required to perform 24-hour duties as Assistant Duty Officer of the UoD, or as part of facility security, where service is performed with a firearm. Furthermore, mandatory participation in physical education set by the specialized center is key; activities such as obstacle courses, climbing training, and swimming represent increased demands on an individual's physical fitness. Twice a year, during the winter and summer semesters,

students undergo field training held in Vyškov. This field training involves exceptionally demanding situations in terms of mental and physical resilience, as students perform further challenging tasks such as live firing, night navigation, and sleep and nutritional deprivation. Barracks accommodation, a strictly defined regime, unconditional compliance with military regulations, and the specific nature of interpersonal relationships are aspects that can be demanding on their own, let alone in combination

3. Methodology

This study employs a structured literature review approach to identify, analyses, and synthesize empirical research on mental health determinants among students in civilian and military universities. The review focused on peer-reviewed academic journal articles published over the last two decades and written in English. Search terms included “psychological well-being,” “university students,” “military education,” “stress,” “anxiety,” “depression,” and “burnout.”

Inclusion criteria consisted of empirical research that:

- Examined students enrolled in civilian, military, or comparable higher education programs;
- Assessed mental health indicators such as stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, or general psychological well-being;
- Identified determinants or contributing factors affecting these outcomes.

Studies focusing exclusively on clinical populations, non-university military personnel, or secondary school students were excluded. Selected articles were analyzed thematically to identify recurring determinants, differentiating between factors common across student populations and those specific to military university environments. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the structural characteristics of military higher education institutions, particularly within the Czech Republic.

4. Results

The global expansion and intensifying competitiveness of the higher education sector have significantly increased traditional academic stressors, directly correlating with a rise in mental health challenges among the student body. Research indicates that the pressure to conform to institutional standards and sociocultural benchmarks, coupled with the rigorous demands of sustained study hours and the financial burden of tuition fees, represents a primary catalyst for depression, anxiety, and chronic stress within university populations [8-12, 27].

The transition to university represents a pivotal life stage for young adults, characterized by a series of complex challenges. Students are suddenly tasked with exercising full autonomy over their personal lives and academic progress, often while navigating "ill-structured" learning environments that lack the rigid guidance of secondary education. For many, this shift is compounded by physical and emotional distancing from their established support networks as they move away from home for the first time [13,28,30].

The success of this transition often depends on the student's psychological resilience. A large-scale study involving 5,689 college students (Healthy Minds Study, 2007) investigated the interplay between positive mental health and mental illness in predicting academic and suicidal risks. The results demonstrated that flourishing acts as a significant protective factor; students with high levels of positive mental health exhibited the lowest rates of suicidal ideation and academic impairment, regardless of whether they screened positive for a mental disorder. These findings suggest that mental health surveillance should complement traditional disorder screening with an assessment of positive psychological functioning to more accurately identify at-risk individuals [14].

Despite the potential for such protective factors, extensive research continues to validate the alarming prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders among the university population. For instance, a screening initiative conducted at Emory University in the United States, supported by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, highlighted these concerning trends through data collected between 2002 and 2005 [15]. While these findings established a critical baseline in Western contexts, subsequent research in other regions has uncovered even more profound levels of psychological distress.

A notable example is a study which investigated the prevalence and severity of mental health issues among university students in Sialkot, Pakistan, reporting alarmingly high rates of psychological morbidity. The findings revealed that anxiety was the most pervasive issue, affecting 88.4% of the samples, with nearly half (46.8%) experiencing extremely severe symptoms. Stress and depression were also highly prevalent, recorded at 84.4% and 75% respectively, primarily falling within the moderate to severe ranges. These results align with global trends in higher education, where academic and sociocultural pressures increasingly contribute to significant levels of psychological distress, necessitating urgent attention to student well-being [15].

While the severity of distress can vary significantly across different geographical regions, other research further delineates the specific demographic and academic variables that drive these trends. This additional study identifies a significant prevalence of psychological distress among university students, with 27.1%, 47.1%, and 27.0% of the sample scoring in the moderate-to-severe range for depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively—rates that notably exceed established normative data. While gender correlations were weak, female students exhibited significantly higher levels of anxiety and stress, though no significant gender disparity was observed regarding depression.

Consistent with the theory of emerging adulthood, first- and second-year students, along with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or rural areas, demonstrated heightened vulnerability to mental health issues. Furthermore, the findings highlight disciplinary variations, with social and political science majors reporting higher morbidity than their

peers in medicine or engineering. These results underscore the urgent need for higher education institutions to transition from viewing student mental health as a neglected public health issue toward implementing proactive screening, early intervention, and accessible support services to mitigate the long-term impact on students' educational attainment and quality of life [16].

Complementing these sociodemographic findings, subsequent research further elucidates how individual characteristics and lifestyle factors shape psychological outcomes. Research reveals significant gender disparities in student mental health: female students report higher anxiety levels in their early college years, whereas male students experience a greater incidence of depression. In this study, A significantly higher percentage of male students endured depression than females, which persisted during the four academic years. Anxiety had a significant positive correlation with introversion. Female freshmen's anxiety levels were also associated with their body image, drinking habits, and academic performance [17].

Despite these varied and often severe individual stressors, the longitudinal trajectory of student mental health reveals a notable capacity for resilience. In line with research by Puthran et al. and Liu et al., we observed that psychological distress tends to diminish over time. This suggests that while the transition to higher education triggers acute stress, students successfully undergo an adaptive process, leading to improved emotional stability in later years [18,19].

However, this adaptive capacity does not diminish the immediate risks faced during the initial phase of study. International data underscores the vulnerability of first-year students during the university transition. Specifically, studies in Belgium and Portugal report that between 32% and 35% of the student population experience mental health problems or emotional disorders, with these conditions often resulting in impaired academic performance [20,21].

The severity of this initial distress is further reflected in the specific findings of our study. The study population was characterized by a predominance of female students and those from nuclear families, with the majority maintaining their primary residence at home. Assessment of mental health via standardized subscales showed a stark contrast in symptom severity: although the largest group of students reported normal levels of depression, nearly 42% suffered from anxiety at an extremely severe level. These findings indicate that elevated stress levels are a prevalent feature of the daily student experience within this sample [22].

While the transition period is often viewed as the primary catalyst for distress, other research suggests that psychological pressure may follow a different temporal pattern and often goes untreated. A study of 1,197 UK undergraduates examined whether increased university enrollment correlates with higher rates of psychiatric disturbance. Using the GHQ-28, the researchers found that mental illness rates among students match general population norms, yet only 5.1% of affected individuals seek treatment. The second year was identified as the peak period for psychiatric symptoms, suggesting that academic and situational stressors intensify midway through degree [23].

To better understand the institutional drivers behind these psychiatric symptoms, research has increasingly moved toward assessing the university environment itself as a social ecosystem. For instance, a study in Malaysia utilized the Social Organizational Life Cycle Assessment (SO-LCA) to evaluate the specific social impacts affecting student well-being. Through a stratified sampling of 228 respondents, the research examined dimensions such as health, safety, discrimination, and privacy within the teaching and learning process. While the overall institutional impact on student well-being was found to be positive, the analysis identified critical marginal issues, specifically regarding stress and discriminatory practices. Statistical analysis revealed significant, albeit weak, correlations between suicidal ideation and factors such as academic pressure ($r = 0.226$, $p < 0.01$), as well as gender, sexual, and disability-based discrimination. Furthermore, the study highlighted systemic weaknesses in feedback mechanisms and concerns over grade confidentiality. Despite these challenges, high levels of institutional loyalty were observed, with students expressing intent to pursue further studies at the same department. The findings underscore the necessity of refining anonymous feedback systems and enhancing privacy protocols to further bolster the social sustainability of the university environment [24].

However, the social and institutional environment represents only one dimension of student well-being; the internal resilience of the student body is equally shaped by individual behavioral patterns. Complementing the focus on institutional dynamics, a cross-sectional study investigated the correlation between lifestyle choices and psychological distress among 173 university students, utilizing the Simple Lifestyle Indicator Questionnaire (SLIQ) and the DASS-42 scale. The findings reveal a concerning prevalence of poor health habits, with 71.8% of participants maintaining an 'unhealthy' lifestyle and none reaching the 'healthy' category. Statistical analysis demonstrated that a poor lifestyle significantly correlates with elevated levels of anxiety (46.8%), depression, and stress (50.7%). These results underscore the critical impact of daily habits on mental and social well-being, suggesting that academic institutions must actively implement health-promotion programs to foster resilience and mitigate psychological morbidity within the student body [25].

The urgency of addressing these individual and institutional factors becomes even more apparent when shifting from local observations to a global perspective, particularly within developing economies. This systematic review and meta-analysis investigated the prevalence of depressive symptoms among university students in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), synthesizing data from 37 studies involving 76,608 participants across 20 nations. The findings indicate an overall pooled prevalence of 24.4% (95% CI: 19.2%–30.5%), highlighting a significant mental health burden in these regions. Notably, subgroup analyses demonstrated that this prevalence remained consistent regardless of study design, screening instruments, academic major, or economic classification. However, the researchers noted that much of the existing literature relies on small, non-representative samples, and substantial heterogeneity was observed across the included studies. These results underscore the urgent need for standardized, large-scale longitudinal research to better understand and address the mental health crisis among students in developing economies, while cautioning that current estimates are influenced by diverse methodologies and a lack of linguistic diversity in published research [26].

In military education environment, this empirical study identifies professional identity formation and self-

acceptance as the primary determinants of psychological well-being among military cadets. The research highlights a critical tension between the rigid organizational discipline of military institutions and the students' need for personal autonomy; when cadets fail to align their self-image with the military profession, often due to parental pressure, idealized expectations, or external life circumstances—they face a high risk of psychological morbidity. The findings suggest that a lack of independent control over one's environment in these settings leads to profound emotional distress, including weariness and hopelessness, underscoring the need for institutional support that fosters a favorable collective atmosphere and helps cadets navigate the transition from civilian to military life [30-32].

The complexities of identity formation are further intensified when students must navigate "dual-professional" roles, such as those found in military medical education. Building on this, a study investigated the psychological well-being of medical students at the Uniformed Services University (USU), focusing on the specific intersection of their roles as military officers and medical trainees. Using the Medical Student Well-being Index (MSWBI) and burnout measures, the researchers analyzed how mental health fluctuates across the four-year curriculum and its impact on students' intentions to continue both military service and medical practice.

The results indicated that while the overall well-being of USU students is comparable to general medical student populations, significant differences exist between cohorts; specifically, well-being improved as students transitioned into their fourth year. However, clinical students (MS3 and MS4) demonstrated a decreased desire to remain in the military and a higher tendency to reconsider their medical career compared to their pre-clerkship counterparts. The study concluded that well-being is more strongly associated with "medicine-oriented" career intentions than "military-oriented" ones, suggesting that while the current state of well-being is satisfactory, targeted interventions are needed to address the divergent pressures of military and medical contexts to strengthen long-term professional commitment [33].

5. Conclusions

The structured review demonstrates that while civilian and military universities share several determinants affecting students' psychological well-being, military higher education introduces additional stressors that stem from professional identity formation, organizational discipline, and physical performance demands. These unique factors highlight the necessity of targeted mental health strategies tailored to the military educational environment.

For civilian universities, interventions should continue to prioritize academic stress management, social integration, and support for life transitions. In contrast, military institutions, especially those operating under the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, should develop context-specific programs that consider the psychological effects of hierarchical structures, physical expectations, and the cultural norms associated with military training. Furthermore, institutions must recognize that psychological distress is often non-linear; while resilience typically grows through adaptation, specific periods—such as the second academic year—may represent critical peaks in psychiatric symptoms that require heightened surveillance.

Effective support strategies should adopt a holistic approach, addressing not only institutional frameworks but also individual lifestyle factors. Given the high correlation between unhealthy daily habits and anxiety or depression, universities should actively promote health-promotion programs to bolster student resilience. Future research should further explore differences between civilian and military mental health trajectories, evaluate intervention effectiveness, and examine how institutional culture influences student resilience and psychological well-being. Such insights will help ensure that both civilian and military higher education institutions provide environments that promote not only academic success but also sustainable mental health.

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