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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, 5].

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 [6]. 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, 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.". Psychological well-being is not merely a subjective feeling of satisfaction; it represents a key

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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 Programm Czech Republic, they should have acquired key competencies intended to facilitate their adaptation to university life [7]. 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 [8].

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 [8].

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 programm, 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 employed a structured literature review to identify, analyse, and synthesise empirical research on the determinants of psychological well-being among students in civilian and military higher education institutions. Two independent literature searches were conducted in the Scopus database in January 2026. The first search focused on civilian university students, while the second targeted students enrolled in military higher education institutions and military academies. Search strategies combined keywords related to psychological well-being, mental health, university students, military education, stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2004 and 2026 were considered. Studies were eligible if they (1) examined students enrolled in civilian or military higher education institutions, (2) investigated psychological well-being, mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, or related psychological outcomes, (3) analysed determinants, predictors, or factors associated with these outcomes, and (4) reported empirical research findings. Studies focusing exclusively on clinical populations, active military personnel outside higher education, secondary school students, psychometric validation of instruments, intervention protocols, conference papers, editorials, and studies unrelated to psychological well-being were excluded. The searches identified 788 records for civilian higher education and 165 records for military higher education. During the initial screening, titles and abstracts were reviewed using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each study was classified into one of three categories: include, borderline, or exclude. studies classified as include and borderline were retained for further assessment to minimise the risk of excluding potentially relevant evidence, whereas studies classified as exclude did not meet the predefined eligibility criteria.

The searches identified 788 records for civilian higher education and 165 records for military higher education. Following title and abstract screening, studies were classified as include, borderline, or exclude according to predefined eligibility criteria. After eligibility assessment, 50 studies (30 civilian and 20 military) were selected for evidence extraction and thematic synthesis. The retained studies were subsequently examined in greater detail and analysed using thematic synthesis. Determinants of psychological well-being were organised into five thematic categories: (1) academic stressors, (2) social and institutional factors, (3) individual and lifestyle factors, (4) military-specific educational factors, and (5) professional identity and organisational commitment. This approach enabled a systematic comparison of determinants common to civilian and military university students as well as factors specific to the military educational environment. To enhance methodological transparency, the same search strategy, screening procedure, and eligibility criteria were applied to both civilian and military literature searches. This ensured the comparability of the two datasets and strengthened the validity of the subsequent comparative analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Eligibility Criteria for Study Inclusion and Exclusion.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	University students, college students, military cadets	Secondary school students, active military personnel, veterans
Institution	Civilian universities, military academies, higher education institutions	Non-higher education institutions
Outcomes	Psychological well-being, mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, resilience, psychological distress	Clinical diagnosis only, rehabilitation, medical treatment, physical injuries without psychological outcomes
Study type	Empirical peer-reviewed journal articles	Editorials, conference papers, conference abstracts, book chapters, study protocols, dissertations
Publication language	English	Languages other than English
Publication period	2004–2026	Publications before 2004 or after 2026
Focus of the study	Determinants, predictors, correlates, or factors influencing psychological well-being or mental health	Psychometric validation only, intervention efficacy only, instrument development without analysis of determinants
Data source	Civilian or military university students	Clinical populations, secondary school students, active-duty military personnel outside higher education

4. Results

The results are presented as a thematic synthesis of the included studies, allowing for a systematic comparison of determinants of psychological well-being across civilian and military higher education institutions. The identified determinants were grouped into five thematic categories reflecting the most consistently reported factors influencing students' mental health and psychological well-being.

4.1. Academic Stressors

Across civilian university studies, academic demands emerged as one of the most frequently reported determinants of psychological well-being. The reviewed studies consistently identified academic workload, examination pressure, transition to university, performance expectations, financial concerns, and adaptation to a new academic environment as recurring sources of psychological distress. The increasing competitiveness of higher education and the pressure to meet institutional and sociocultural expectations further contribute to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among university students [9-14, 28, 32, 34].

The transition from secondary education to university represents a particularly vulnerable developmental period. Students are required to adapt simultaneously to increased academic autonomy, unfamiliar learning environments, greater personal responsibility, and separation from established family and social support networks. Consequently, first-year students consistently report higher levels of psychological distress than students in later years, highlighting the importance of successful academic and social adaptation during the early stages of higher education [14,17, 21, 29, 31-34].

Academic stress is not limited to workload alone. The reviewed literature suggests that psychological distress results from the interaction of multiple factors, including academic pressure, socioeconomic background, social expectations, and perceived institutional support. Demographic characteristics also influence students' vulnerability, with several studies reporting higher anxiety among female students, increased risk among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and differences across academic disciplines [17-18]. These findings indicate that psychological well-being should be understood as a multidimensional construct shaped by both individual characteristics and the broader academic environment.

Despite the high prevalence of psychological distress, literature also identifies important protective factors. Positive psychological functioning, resilience, flourishing, and sense of coherence appear to reduce the negative impact of academic stress on students' mental health and academic performance [15, 19, 20, 33]. Longitudinal evidence further suggests that psychological distress generally decreases as students adapt to university life, although the first year—and, in some contexts, the second year of study—remains a period of heightened vulnerability requiring targeted institutional support [19-22]. These findings emphasise the importance of early screening, preventive mental health programmes, and comprehensive student support services within higher education institutions [15, 21, 27].

4.2. Social and Institutional Factors

Social and institutional factors represented another major group of determinants of psychological well-being among university students. The reviewed studies consistently highlighted the importance of social support, sense of belonging, institutional climate, residential status, and the quality of relationships within the university environment. Students reporting stronger perceived social support and higher levels of sense of coherence generally demonstrated better psychological well-being, whereas loneliness, social pressure, and limited institutional support were associated with poorer psychological outcomes [21,33, 35]. Beyond interpersonal relationships, the reviewed literature suggests that the university environment itself functions as an important social ecosystem influencing students' mental health. Institutional conditions shape psychological well-being through access to support services, perceived fairness, communication practices, and opportunities for student participation. Discrimination, concerns regarding privacy, insufficient feedback mechanisms, and limited institutional responsiveness have also been identified as factors contributing to increased psychological distress and reduced student satisfaction [34].

Supportive institutional environments can strengthen resilience, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and facilitate positive adaptation throughout university studies. Universities characterised by transparent communication, accessible psychological support services, and inclusive organisational climates generally report more favourable student well-being outcomes. Overall, the evidence indicates that psychological well-being cannot be understood solely as an individual characteristic but should also be viewed as an outcome shaped by organisational culture and the quality of the educational environment [21, 26, 34-37]. Access to psychological support services and students' willingness to seek professional help also emerged as important determinants of psychological well-being. Institutional barriers, stigma, and limited awareness of available services may delay help-seeking among university students, whereas supportive university environments facilitate timely access to mental health care [34].

4.3. Individual Psychological and Lifestyle Factors

Individual psychological characteristics were among the most frequently identified protective factors. Resilience, self-esteem, mindfulness, self-compassion, hope, sense of coherence, and solution-focused thinking were repeatedly

associated with higher psychological well-being and lower psychological distress [33].

Lifestyle factors also played an important role. Physical exercise, sleep, and everyday health behaviours were linked to subjective well-being and mental health outcomes. These findings suggest that student well-being is shaped not only by academic and institutional demands but also by behavioural patterns that influence emotional regulation, energy levels, and stress recovery. Lifestyle factors, particularly sleep quality, emerged as important determinants of psychological well-being. Evidence indicates that poor sleep quality is highly prevalent among university students and is strongly associated with perceived stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, highlighting sleep as an important target for mental health promotion interventions [13]. Healthy lifestyle behaviours consistently emerged as important protective factors for students' mental health. Regular physical activity, adequate sleep, regular breakfast consumption, and structured daily routines were associated with better psychological well-being, whereas unhealthy lifestyle behaviours—including insufficient sleep, physical inactivity, irregular schedules, and smoking—were significant predictors of poor mental health [24].

4.4. Mental Health Outcomes in Civilian Universities

The reviewed civilian studies most frequently examined stress, anxiety, depression, psychological distress, burnout, and subjective well-being. These outcomes were often interrelated. Academic pressure, loneliness, financial strain, and weak support systems were associated with higher distress, whereas resilience, mindfulness, social support, and positive psychological resources appeared to buffer negative outcomes The findings indicate that student mental health should not be approached only through the lens of clinical symptoms. Positive psychological functioning, including subjective well-being, hope, resilience, and sense of coherence, represents an important protective dimension that can reduce vulnerability to academic and social stressors. Higher levels of depressive symptoms were strongly associated with suicidal ideation among university students, while most affected students were not receiving appropriate psychiatric care, emphasising the need for early identification and accessible mental health support services [16].

Socio-demographic characteristics also contributed to variations in mental health outcomes. Male students reported significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, while residential status and parents' educational attainment were associated with differences in psychological distress, indicating that family and living conditions may influence students' mental well-being [22]. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that depressive symptoms are highly prevalent among university students, affecting approximately one in four students in low- and middle-income countries, thereby reinforcing the need for early identification and preventive mental health interventions within higher education institutions [25].

4.5. Military-Specific Determinants

Military higher education shares several determinants of psychological well-being with civilian universities, including stress, anxiety, resilience, sleep quality, physical activity, and social support. However, the reviewed evidence consistently indicates that the military educational environment introduces additional psychological demands associated with professional identity formation, organisational discipline, hierarchical structures, leadership, and adaptation to military culture. Consequently, cadets' psychological well-being is shaped not only by academic requirements but also by the process of military socialisation and preparation for future operational responsibilities [36, 37].

The reviewed military studies further demonstrate that organisational and professional factors play a central role in cadets' psychological adaptation. Organisational support, leadership quality, career identity, and commitment to military service were associated with better mental health outcomes and more successful adaptation to military training, whereas difficulties adjusting to military expectations and organisational culture contributed to increased psychological distress [38, 39]. In addition, resilience, self-efficacy, adaptive coping strategies, mindfulness, and well-being literacy consistently emerged as important protective factors facilitating successful adaptation to the demanding military environment [40, 41].

4.6. Burnout, Training Stress, and Resilience in Military Students

Recent intervention studies demonstrated that resilience training combined with supervisor support reduced psychological distress and improved performance among military cadets [39]. Subjective well-being and burnout were linked to self-efficacy among military cadets, suggesting that confidence in one’s ability to manage demands may reduce the negative psychological impact of training. Similarly, leadership support was shown to buffer the relationship between emotional demands and burnout among officer cadets.

Resilience-related studies further indicated that military cadets’ ability to cope with stress is shaped by both individual and organisational resources. Hardiness, coping strategies, mindfulness-based stress reduction, resilience training, and emotional integration appeared as relevant protective mechanisms in the demanding environment of military education [38, 41].

4.7. Comparison of Civilian and Military Universities

The reviewed literature indicates that psychological well-being in both civilian and military higher education is

influenced by several common determinants. Across both educational settings, academic stress, social support, resilience, lifestyle behaviours, and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress were consistently identified as important factors affecting students' mental health [9-25, 30, 31, 38].

Despite these similarities, military studies identified several additional determinants associated with the specific organisational and professional context of military education. In addition to academic demands, cadets were required to adapt to military discipline, hierarchical structures, organisational commitment, leadership, and the development of a military professional identity (Table2). Military studies also highlighted the importance of organisational support, career identity, resilience, self-efficacy, coping strategies, mindfulness, and well-being literacy as factors facilitating successful adaptation to military training and service preparation [36-41].

Table 2 Comparative synthesis of determinants of psychological well-being in civilian and military higher education.

Determinant Domain	Civilian Universities	Military Universities	Evidence From The Review
Academic stressors	Academic workload, examinations, transition to university, financial concerns, academic adaptation	Academic demands combined with military training, field exercises, military performance standards and discipline	Common determinant in both settings; military studies additionally emphasise structured training and military obligations.
Social and institutional factors	Social support, sense of belonging, institutional climate, residential status, access to support services	Social support, organisational support, leadership, command climate, unit cohesion	Present in both settings, but military studies place greater emphasis on organisational relationships and leadership.
Individual psychological factors	Resilience, self-esteem, mindfulness, hope, sense of coherence, coping	Resilience, self-efficacy, adaptive coping, mindfulness, well-being literacy	Protective factors consistently reported across both educational environments.
Lifestyle and health-related factors	Sleep quality, physical activity, healthy lifestyle, nutrition	Sleep, physical fitness, physical readiness, recovery from military training	Lifestyle factors were identified in both settings but were more frequently examined in civilian studies.
Professional identity and organisational commitment	Occasionally discussed in relation to career development	Military identity, organisational commitment, adaptation to military culture, professional socialisation	Characteristic determinant of military higher education.
Mental health outcomes	Stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, psychological distress	Stress, anxiety, burnout, psychological distress, adaptation to military service	Psychological distress was reported in both settings, although military studies more frequently examined adaptation to military training.

Note. The comparison is based on the thematic synthesis of the studies included after screening. The domains reflect the frequency with which determinants emerged across the reviewed literature rather than the number of individual studies reporting each determinant.

Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that psychological well-being in higher education is shaped by a multidimensional interaction of academic, social, institutional, and individual factors. However, compared with civilian universities, military higher education places greater emphasis on organisational and professional determinants associated with military culture, leadership, and preparation for future operational service [31, 38-41].

5. Conclusions

This structured literature review synthesised current evidence on the determinants of psychological well-being among students in civilian and military higher education institutions. The findings indicate that psychological well-being is influenced by a complex interaction between academic, social, institutional, individual, and lifestyle factors across both educational environments. Academic workload, transition to university, social support, resilience, and healthy lifestyle behaviours consistently emerged as the most frequently reported determinants among civilian university students.

Although many determinants are shared across civilian and military higher education, the review identified several factors that are specific to the military educational environment. These include professional identity formation, adaptation to military culture, organisational discipline, leadership, organisational commitment, and the psychological demands associated with military training and future operational responsibilities. These additional determinants suggest that psychological well-being in military universities cannot be understood solely through the framework commonly applied to civilian higher education.

The findings have important practical implications for higher education policy and student support. Civilian universities should continue to strengthen programmes focused on academic stress management, social integration, resilience, and healthy lifestyle promotion. Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republicrticularly those operating within the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, should complement these approaches with interventions addressing military-specific organisational and professional demands, leadership development, and adaptation to military culture.

This review also demonstrates the value of adopting a multidimensional perspective on student mental health. Rather than focusing exclusively on psychological distress, higher education institutions should promote protective factors such as resilience, social support, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being, which contribute to students' long-term adaptation and academic success.

The present review is subject to several limitations. The literature search was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in the Scopus database, and considerable methodological heterogeneity was observed across the included studies. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the development of psychological well-being throughout university education and should further investigate the effectiveness of interventions designed specifically for military higher education. Comparative international research would also contribute to a better understanding of how organisational culture and educational context shape students' psychological well-being across different higher education systems.

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