

Exploring the Contributing Factors of Stress and the Importance of Social Support among TVET Trainees

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ABSTRACT

Mental health among trainees in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs has been receiving increasing attention; however, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies specifically examining the role of social support in stress management. This study was conducted to identify the factors contributing to elevated stress levels and to explore the importance of social support received by trainees in managing stress. A qualitative research design was employed, involving data collection through focus group discussions (FGD) conducted in the form of group counseling sessions. Six TVET trainees who were members of the Student Representative Council at the Advanced Technology Training Center (ADTEC), Department of Human Resource (JTM) Campus Ipoh, were selected using purposive sampling. Findings revealed that the main factors contributing to high levels of stress among trainees included overlapping responsibilities as members of the Student Representative Council and commitments to skill workshops, burdensome financial constraints, and peer relationship challenges. The study also found that social support from family, peers, and lecturers played a significant role in helping trainees cope with stress, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance self-confidence and motivation. Accordingly, special emphasis should be placed on the active involvement of institutional counselors, the development of peer mentoring programs, and strengthening the role of families in providing social support to trainees. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for top management in designing policies and implementing more inclusive and responsive practices to address the psychosocial needs of trainees within the TVET education context, particularly in the area of stress management.

Keywords: Stress, Social Support, TVET Trainees, Group Counseling, Stress Contributing Factors

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an essential aspect of every stage of human life, comparable in importance to physical health. It encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which influence how individuals think, feel, and behave in their daily lives. According to Safari et al. (2011), there are stages in life during which individuals may experience serious mental health issues without realizing it. If neglected, these problems have the potential to disrupt daily functioning or future prospects, particularly among children and young people. Therefore, safeguarding and nurturing mental health from an early stage is a crucial component in supporting healthy personal development in the future. Individuals struggling with mental health problems also require professional assistance to navigate challenges more effectively.

According to the American Psychological Association (2019), mental health issues can manifest in various forms. One of the most common is stress, which is a natural response to life pressures. When prolonged, stress can adversely affect an individual's performance and overall well-being. Chronic stress may lead to psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety, which in turn negatively impact productivity and physical health (American Psychological Association, 2020). Good mental health enables individuals to manage emotions, maintain healthy social relationships, make rational decisions, and face life's challenges with greater resilience. Conversely, neglecting mental health can impair academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life (Yusof et al., 2022).

In recent years, mental health among TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) trainees has received growing attention within the education and training landscape. The pressures arising from academic workload, skill-based training, as well as personal and social commitments, put TVET trainees at a higher risk of experiencing prolonged stress. Failure to manage stress effectively may lead to declining academic performance, emotional disturbances, and compromised overall well-being. Previous studies have shown that stress among higher education students generally stems from academic, financial, social, and psychological factors (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within the context of TVET, these stressors may be more intense since trainees are also involved in demanding practical and industrial training activities.

Despite the growing concern, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies focusing specifically on the role of social support in helping TVET trainees manage stress. Social support has been identified as an effective psychological protective factor in mitigating the negative effects of stress. Sources of social support include family, peers, lecturers, and institutional systems (Thoits, 2011). Family factors, in particular, play a significant role in an individual's mental and academic development. Amy and Loh Siew Mei (2000) emphasized that academic achievement is influenced not only by classroom instruction but also by personality formation and family values developed since childhood. Parenting style also contributes to academic success, regardless of socioeconomic status (Hill, 2001; Jackson, 2002).

In the context of TVET training, social support contributes not only to emotional well-being but also to trainees' motivation and success in their training programs. However, there remains a limited number of studies focusing specifically on the role of social support among TVET trainees in Malaysia, particularly those holding leadership responsibilities within their institutions.

Hence, this study was conducted to explore the factors contributing to stress among TVET trainees and to evaluate the importance of social support in managing their emotional challenges. It also aims to propose suitable intervention strategies to strengthen the social support system and enhance trainees' mental well-being. The findings are expected to benefit educational institutions, counselors, and policymakers in formulating more inclusive and responsive policies and practices that cater to the psychological and emotional needs of TVET trainees.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in the form of group counseling sessions. This design was chosen to explore in depth the trainees' experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms regarding stress and social support within their training environment.

Research Location

The study was conducted at the Advanced Technology Training Center (ADTEC) under the Department of Human Resource (JTM), Campus Ipoh, Perak. This institution was selected because it offers training programs based on technical skills and includes trainees who hold leadership positions within the campus community.

Research Sample

A total of six TVET trainees, all of whom were members of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at ADTEC JTM Ipoh, were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria were active involvement in campus activities, commitment to skill workshops, and willingness to share experiences openly. This study adhered to ethical standards, including confidentiality and informed consent. All participants signed written consent forms, and their identities were anonymized through the use of codes. The data collected were used solely for research purposes.

Table 1 below presents the demographic background of the study participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Field of Study	State	Position
PK1	20	Male	Foundry	Perak	Deputy President
PK2	20	Male	CADD	Perak	Multimedia Exco
PK3	19	Male	PPU	Terengganu	Multimedia Exco
PK4	19	Male	Elektrical	Perak	Sports Exco
PK5	20	Male	PPU	Perak	Economic Exco
PK6	20	Male	Elektrical	Perak	Welfare Exco

Data Collection

The focus group discussion sessions lasted for 90 minutes and were facilitated by two registered counselors. Audio recordings were made for verbatim transcription purposes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to the sources of stress and types of social support received by the trainees. In addition, researchers took field notes to capture non-verbal expressions and interactions among participants during the sessions, thereby enriching the interpretation of the qualitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Source of Stress: Academic Pressure

One of the primary causes of stress among TVET trainees is the academic and training workload, which includes assignments, workshop projects, and examinations. Trainees are required to master technical skills within a short period while meeting the performance standards set by their instructors. This pressure affects their mental health, often resulting in anxiety, insomnia, and loss of motivation to study.

“Sometimes all the assignments come at once. I have to complete a project in the workshop and then work on the report. When there’s too much to handle, I can’t sleep and get easily irritated.”

(Participant PK1)

“As exams get closer, I feel pressured because I have to revise theories while preparing for programs such as the Instructor Appreciation Event. Sometimes I cry because I feel I can’t manage everything.”

(Participant PK2)

These situations show that excessive academic and training pressure can negatively affect trainees' emotional well-being. Without proper management, this stress could potentially lead to burnout, hindering their personal and academic growth.

Source of Stress: Financial Constraints

Financial pressure also emerged as a significant source of stress. Many trainees face difficulties managing their daily expenses, such as food, transportation, and learning materials. This financial strain often leads to anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulty maintaining focus in their studies.

“Even though meals and accommodation are provided, sometimes the money isn’t enough for extra food, project materials, or personal needs. When I think about all that, I get stressed and can’t concentrate on studying.”

(Participant PK3)

“Sometimes, when I need to buy stationery or materials for assignments, I have to borrow money from friends because my allowance isn’t enough. Thinking about all this makes me anxious and distracted in class.”

(Participant PK1)

These examples illustrate that financial constraints can impact trainees’ mental well-being. Support from family, peers, or counselors including financial guidance and referral to aid programs is essential to help trainees cope with these challenges and maintain focus during training.

Source of Stress: Social Relationships

Social relationships with peers, seniors, or instructors also contribute to stress among TVET trainees. Conflicts, misunderstandings, feelings of isolation, or lack of cooperation particularly within the Student Representative Council (SRC) can negatively affect emotional stability and motivation.

“I feel my peers are not friendly and sometimes I’m excluded. In the SRC, some members don’t do their work, so others have to take on extra responsibilities. I feel awkward asking for help, and sometimes I just want to be alone.”

(Participant PK4)

“In group projects, a few members don’t cooperate. Most of the work is done by just me and two others. It’s stressful and disappointing when our efforts aren’t appreciated.”

(Participant PK5)

These findings indicate that social conflicts and lack of teamwork can reduce mental well-being and group productivity. Thus, social support, communication skills, and conflict management are crucial for helping trainees adapt to their social environment and leadership responsibilities in college or residence halls.

Form of Social Support: Family

A lack of quality interaction and emotional connection within families, particularly with mothers, can affect children’s emotional stability and perceived social support. Family presence as listeners, advisors, and motivators helps trainees manage stress more effectively. Financial assistance also helps cover project materials and personal expenses, thereby reducing anxiety and improving focus.

“When I feel stressed about assignments or projects, I always call my mother. Her advice and encouragement make me feel calm. Sometimes she also sends me some money for project tools, which really helps.”

(Participant PK6)

“When I’m overwhelmed with assignments, I text my father. His motivational words and advice make me feel relieved. Sometimes he sends a little money for project materials—it helps me stay focused.”

(Participant PK2)

These examples show that family support provides both practical and emotional benefits, reducing stress and enhancing trainees’ psychological well-being. Moral encouragement from family helps sustain motivation and focus in the face of academic challenges.

Form of Social Support: Peers

Peers serve as a key source of social support through shared experiences, motivation, and assistance in managing tasks and time. They help one another complete group projects, offer encouragement, and provide emotional

outlets contributing to improved mental health. Positive peer relationships also foster teamwork and reduce feelings of isolation in the TVET environment

"My friends often remind me about important dates and help with projects. When I feel stressed, we talk and share experiences, which makes it easier to handle assignments."

(Participant PK3)

"Friends remind me of submission deadlines and help me review my project work. When I'm stressed, we discuss and share how to get things done—it makes me feel calmer and more organized."

(Participant PK4)

These findings suggest that peer support acts as an effective support system, helping trainees reduce stress, improve productivity, and develop better time management strategies. It also fosters a sense of belonging and social connectedness.

Form of Social Support: Instructors

Lecturers and workshop instructors who understand the trainees' difficulties play a crucial role by offering advice, guidance, and flexibility such as deadline extensions or alternative approaches to assignments. Support from instructors helps trainees balance academic demands with mental health needs, while also building confidence, discipline, and problem-solving skills.

"My workshop instructor understands if I'm late with a project because of other assignments. He gives tips and sometimes extends the deadline. That makes me feel relieved and more focused."

(Participant PK5)

"Sometimes the instructor allows more time or shows an easier way to complete the project. That makes me feel calmer and more confident to continue learning."

(Participant PK6)

Instructor support thus reduces academic stress and helps trainees adapt to their learning schedules. Guidance and flexibility not only enable them to complete tasks on time but also enhance confidence and problem-solving abilities.

Form of Social Support: Counselors

Institutional counselors provide emotional support and teach stress management strategies to trainees. They play an essential role as objective listeners, offering counseling sessions, advice, and techniques such as time management, relaxation, and problem-solving skills. This support is particularly crucial for trainees struggling with heavy workloads or adjustment difficulties.

"When I feel very stressed and don't know how to manage my time, I meet the counselor. She teaches me how to plan my schedule and relax. After the session, I feel calmer and know what to do first."

(Participant PK4)

"Whenever I feel pressured by too many tasks, I see the counselor. She shows me how to organize my daily schedule and breathing techniques to relax. After the session, I feel relieved and more focused."

(Participant PK5)

These accounts highlight the significant role of counselors in systematically helping trainees manage stress. Counseling not only lowers stress levels but also strengthens self-regulation, time management, and confidence in handling academic and social challenges.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that training workload, financial difficulties, and peer relationship issues are the primary sources of stress among TVET trainees, particularly those involved in the Student Representative Council (SRC). The overlapping roles between being a trainee and a student leader add a new dimension to the pressures they face.

Therefore, there is a strong need for specialized support mechanisms for trainees who hold leadership positions. Such mechanisms should be integrated into institutional guidance and mentoring programs within TVET institutions. In addition, social support, particularly from family and peers, plays a crucial role in reducing stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Emotional support from parents or family members provides moral strength, especially when trainees face academic or financial stress. Iwaniee and Sneddon (2002) found that effective parenting skills influence children's psychological well-being and self-confidence, which in turn shape their behavior and attitudes.

Institutions are also encouraged to organize regular counseling and academic guidance programs, strengthen peer support networks through group-based activities, and provide training in time management and coping skills for trainees (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These initiatives can help trainees develop adaptive coping mechanisms to handle stress and maintain motivation throughout their training period.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to stress management that incorporates not only individual coping strategies but also structured institutional and social support systems.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that TVET trainees experience multiple sources of stress, including training workload, financial difficulties, and social challenges. These pressures not only affect their mental well-being, but also have implications for training performance, motivation, and social competence.

The implications of this study underscore the importance of holistic interventions involving trainees, families, peers, instructors, and counselors to ensure that trainees can adapt effectively to the TVET environment.

The intensive nature of the training system can hinder trainees' ability to complete tasks and projects within designated deadlines. This highlights the need for time management strategies, academic support from instructors, and counseling guidance to help trainees manage stress more effectively. Financial strain, interpersonal conflicts, and academic challenges increase the risk of burnout, anxiety, and emotional disturbances. Hence, social support from family, peers, instructors, and counselors is vital in building trainees' mental resilience and emotional well-being.

Social relationship problems such as lack of cooperation within the Student Representative Council can reduce group productivity and trainee motivation. Therefore, developing communication, teamwork, and leadership skills is essential to ensure that trainees collaborate effectively in group activities.

Based on the study's findings, several key actions are recommended such as Instructor Support and Flexibility. Instructors should provide additional guidance sessions and allow flexibility in assignment deadlines to help trainees manage academic and training-related stress. Others, Financial Support Programs. Institutions should introduce financial literacy workshops and additional financial aid to help trainees meet project and personal needs.

Other action are recommended is Peer Support and Team-Building Activities. Activities that promote teamwork, peer collaboration, and social bonding such as team building programs and peer mentoring should be implemented to strengthen interpersonal relationships among trainees. Next, Counseling and Stress Management Programs. Institutional counselors should conduct individual and group counseling sessions focused on stress management techniques, time management, and emotional regulation. Trainees should also be encouraged to

utilize counseling services proactively. By implementing these measures, TVET institutions can create a more supportive learning environment that prioritizes both **mental health** and **academic success**

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that stress among TVET trainees arises primarily from overlapping academic workloads, financial constraints, and social relationship challenges—particularly for those holding leadership positions such as members of the Student Representative Council (SRC). These stressors can significantly affect trainees' mental health, motivation, and academic performance if not managed effectively.

The findings highlight that social support plays a pivotal role in helping trainees cope with stress. Support from family members provides emotional stability and financial assistance; peers offer motivation, shared understanding, and collaboration; instructors provide guidance and flexibility; and counselors deliver structured psychological support and coping strategies. It is evident that holistic support systems involving all these elements are essential to ensure trainees' mental resilience and success in the TVET environment. By fostering a supportive ecosystem that integrates family engagement, institutional counseling, and peer-based initiatives, trainees can better adapt to challenges, maintain emotional balance, and achieve their full potential.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that mental health support and social well-being should be considered integral components of the TVET education system—equally important as technical skill development. Continuous efforts by institutions, families, and peers are necessary to cultivate a mentally healthy, emotionally resilient, and socially competent generation of skilled professionals.

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