

The Effects of Academic Workload on Sleep Quality and Mental Health among University Students

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800071>

Received: 09 August 2026; Accepted: 14 August 2026; Published: 25 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Academic workload is an increasingly important concern because excessive demands may affect university students' sleep quality, mental health, and overall well-being. This study examined students' experiences of academic workload and analysed its implications through the perspectives of Humanism, Existentialism, and the Malaysian National Education Philosophy. A qualitative exploratory case study design was employed, involving 10 students from different faculties and years of study. Data were collected through structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that 60% of respondents considered their academic workload very dense and challenging, while 40% rated it as moderate. Heavy workloads, overlapping deadlines, and examination preparation contributed to inadequate and irregular sleep, physical fatigue, reduced concentration, emotional stress, anxiety, loss of motivation, and social isolation. Respondents expressed mixed views regarding institutional and lecturer responsiveness, highlighting supportive lecturers and counseling services, as well as inadequate coordination of assessments across courses. The philosophical analysis revealed an imbalance between intellectual achievement and students' physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being. The study recommends better coordination of academic assessments, more balanced teaching practices, institutional sensitivity to students' limitations, proactive time management, and stronger self-care practices. These measures may support academic excellence without compromising student well-being.

Keyword: Academic workload; sleep quality; mental health; university students; Humanism; Existentialism; National Education Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Life in a higher education institution is often regarded as an important stage in a person's intellectual, social, and personal development before entering the world of work. At this level, students must not only master knowledge in their respective fields but also meet numerous academic demands, including assignments, quizzes, presentations, group projects, and examinations. However, the increasingly competitive higher education landscape has intensified academic pressure among university students. In striving for academic excellence and meeting institutional assessment requirements, many students sacrifice rest and sleep, exposing themselves to challenges that may impair their mental and physical well-being. This situation raises the question of whether the current higher education system can still maintain an appropriate balance between academic achievement and student welfare. This case study, therefore, examines the effects of academic workload on university students' sleep quality and mental health. It focuses on students' experiences and perspectives regarding academic pressure and its implications for daily life. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding, the issue is analysed through three philosophical perspectives: Humanism, Existentialism and the Malaysian National Education Philosophy (NEP). The study not only identifies the consequences of academic workload but also

assesses whether contemporary higher education remains aligned with the aim of developing balanced and holistic individuals.

Sleep is a basic human need that supports physical, mental, and emotional health. Adequate, high-quality sleep restores stamina, allows the mind to rest, and reduces stress, enabling individuals to perform daily activities with greater energy. Sleep is also crucial to cognitive functions such as learning, memory, concentration, and problem-solving. Nevertheless, sleep quality among university students has become increasingly concerning in a technology-dependent, modern environment, particularly as students use the internet extensively to complete assignments. Investigative journalist, author, and former professor Ron Chepesiuk argued that artificial light has altered the natural human sleep cycle by extending nighttime wakefulness. University students also face continuous assignments, examinations, and co-curricular commitments. Students in medicine and nursing may also undertake clinical placements that require considerable effort, contributing to sleep disruption and irregular daily sleep patterns.

Sleep quality is closely associated with academic performance. Insufficient sleep causes fatigue and daytime drowsiness, which can reduce classroom concentration, memory and decision-making ability. These effects may impair learning and academic achievement. As adequate, good-quality sleep can support student performance, it is important to understand how academic demands affect sleep and well-being among university students.

Academic pressure is one of the main challenges experienced by students in higher education.

Assignments, quizzes, presentations, group projects and examinations require substantial commitments of time and energy. Students may have to manage several tasks simultaneously within limited periods, thereby increasing the pressure they experience. Previous studies indicate that academic pressure can affect student well-being, particularly sleep quality and mental health. Prolonged sleep deprivation may cause physical fatigue, poor concentration, declining academic performance and an increased risk of emotional difficulties such as stress, anxiety and depression. This is concerning because sleep and mental health are essential to the development of balanced and productive individuals.

Although academic pressure is frequently discussed, students' lived experiences of increasing workload and its daily consequences require further attention. Discussions commonly focus on psychology and academic performance, while philosophical analysis receives less emphasis. This study therefore evaluates the effects of academic workload on sleep quality and mental health through Humanism, Existentialism, and the National Education Philosophy, providing a broader understanding of the relationship between academic demands, student well-being, and the true purpose of higher education.

Operational Definitions

Academic Workload.

Santrock (2018) defines academic workload as the learning demands that students must meet, including assignments, examinations, projects, presentations, and other academic activities that require time and energy. Woolfolk (2019) relates it to the volume of academic work completed over a particular period and its influence on stress and performance, while Ormrod (2020) also includes the cognitive and emotional demands of intensive learning. Operationally, this study defines academic workload as the total academic demands placed on university students, including assignments, quizzes, examinations, presentations, group projects, and other learning activities that may increase pressure and affect well-being.

Sleep Quality

Potter et al. (2021) define sleep quality as satisfaction with the sleep experience, including sufficient duration, continuity, and feeling refreshed after waking. Taylor et al. (2019) state that good sleep allows adequate physical and mental recovery, while Hockenberry and Wilson (2021) emphasize its role in physiological recovery, cognition, and emotional balance. Operationally, sleep quality refers to the adequacy and effectiveness of

students' sleep based on duration, disturbances, difficulty falling asleep, and the freshness and energy experienced after waking.

Mental Health

Townsend and Morgan (2023) describe mental health as a state of well-being that enables optimal functioning, adaptation to life stress, and effective interpersonal relationships. Videbeck (2023) emphasizes emotional, psychological, and social balance, while Varcarolis (2022) describes the capacity to cope with normal stress, work productively, and contribute to society. In this study, mental health refers to students' ability to manage academic pressure, maintain emotional stability, think positively, sustain motivation to learn, develop healthy relationships with peers and lecturers, and participate effectively in academic and social life without emotional disturbance.

National Education Philosophy and the JERI Balance

The Malaysian National Education Philosophy provides the foundation for the national education system. It defines education as a continuous effort to develop individual potential in an integrated manner and to produce balanced, harmonious individuals across the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions, collectively known as JERI. Educational success is therefore not measured solely by academic achievement but also by physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Humanism and Human Well-being

Humanism emphasizes human values, dignity, individual potential, and comprehensive well-being. In education, students are viewed as people with physical, emotional, mental and social needs rather than merely as individuals assessed through academic performance. A humanistic educational approach must therefore consider mental health, rest, emotional pressure and personal limits. Academic overload, overlapping assignments, inadequate sleep and emotional stress demonstrate the need for an education system that develops intellectually capable yet balanced and healthy individuals.

Existentialism: Emotional Crisis, Freedom over Time and Alienation.

Existentialism emphasizes individual responsibility for choices and actions. People possess freedom to decide, but every decision has consequences. Academic pressure may create emotional crises, anxiety and disrupted sleep. Students have freedom to manage their time, yet difficulty balancing study and rest can produce pressure. Excessive academic demands can also reduce social interaction and cause alienation. Existentialism, therefore, helps explain how students confront academic challenges, manage time, maintain relationships, and search for meaning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative exploratory case-study design to understand students' experiences and views. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the issue involves perceptions, experiences, emotions, and personal well-being that require in-depth exploration. It enabled the researchers to develop a comprehensive picture of the realities students experience in the contemporary academic environment.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Primary data were collected through separate structured interviews with ten students from different faculties and years of study. This method enabled the researchers to obtain detailed information on respondents' experiences, perceptions, and views concerning academic workload, sleep, and mental health. The interview instrument was developed from the research objectives, and follow-up questions were used when clarification was needed.

The interview covered:

- Respondent profiles and backgrounds.
- Experiences of sleep disruption and emotional pressure caused by academic workload from an Existentialist perspective.
- Views of the university and academic system's concern for student welfare from a Humanist perspective.
- Assessments of the balance between academic achievement and personal well-being in relation to the National Education Philosophy.

All respondents were informed of the study's purpose and consented before being interviewed. Their identities were kept confidential and replaced by anonymous labels such as informant A and informant B.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed, organized systematically, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved repeatedly reading the transcripts, identifying initial codes, grouping related codes into major themes, and interpreting the themes in line with the research objectives. The themes were subsequently organized under Existentialism, Humanism and the National Education Philosophy. Findings are presented through informants' quotations, thematic tables, and critical explanation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Demographics and Profiles.

This section presents respondents' year of study, faculty or field, and estimated weekly academic commitment. The profile provides context for understanding the academic workload students experience.

Table 1: Respondent demographics.

Code	Year	Faculty / Field	Estimated academic hrs/week
Informant A	Year 2	Nursing	65
Informant B	Year 2	Medicine	10
Informant C	Year 2	Nursing	62
Informant D	Year 4	Medicine	72
Informant E	Year 2	Medicine	12
Informant F	Year 3	Education, Language and Communication	20
Informant G	Year 1	Foundation Studies	40
Informant H	Year 2	Nursing	74
Informant I	Year 4	Mechanical Engineering	9-10
Informant J	Year 2	Medicine	40-45

Table 1: The study involved ten informants from different years and fields of study, including nursing, medicine, education, foundation studies, and mechanical engineering. Their estimated academic commitment included time spent attending lectures and completing academic tasks. For descriptive analysis, midpoint values were used for the two reported ranges: 9–10 hours was represented as 9.5 hours, while 40–45 hours was represented

as 42.5 hours. The estimated academic commitment ranged from 9.5 to 74 hours per week, with a mean of 40.7 hours and a median of 41.25 hours. Six informants (60%) reported spending at least 40 hours per week on academic activities, while four (40%) reported 60 hours or more.

Nursing informants reported consistently high academic commitments of 62–74 hours per week, producing an average of 67 hours. In contrast, commitments among medical informants varied considerably, ranging from 10 to 72 hours per week. This variation suggests that academic workload may differ according to programme structure, clinical responsibilities, assessment schedules and individual study practices.

Perceived level of academic workload

Six informants (60%) described their current academic workload as very dense and challenging, while four (40%) classified it as moderate. None considered their workload light. These findings indicate that academic workload represented a significant element of the informants' university experiences, even among those who reported fewer formal academic hours. The perceived intensity of workload was not determined solely by the total number of academic hours. Informants also emphasized the influence of simultaneous assignments, overlapping deadlines, examinations, presentations, and group projects. Consequently, the timing and concentration of academic demands appeared to be as important as the total workload.

Social well-being and sense of self

Heavy academic demands reduced the time available for social interaction, recreation and personal recovery. Some informants declined invitations from friends because they needed to complete assignments. This contributed to feelings of social isolation and difficulty maintaining a balance between academic and personal life. The findings also revealed concerns regarding the meaning of university education. Some informants felt that university life had become centered on completing assignments, meeting deadlines, and satisfying academic expectations rather than enjoying learning or exploring personal interests.

Institutional and individual factors.

Informants acknowledged supportive lecturers, mentoring programs, and counseling services. However, institutional responsiveness was perceived as inconsistent. The principal institutional concern was inadequate coordination of assignments and assessments across courses. Informants reported that several courses frequently established major deadlines within the same week, increasing pressure and reducing opportunities for adequate sleep.

Individual factors included procrastination, ineffective time management, and difficulties establishing personal boundaries. Conversely, proactive planning, prioritization, sufficient rest, and using weekends for recovery were identified as helpful coping strategies.

Overall, academic workload affected sleep quality and mental health through interactions among workload intensity, overlapping assessments, time-management practices, and institutional coordination. The principal reported effects were insufficient sleep, irregular sleep patterns, fatigue, reduced concentration, stress, anxiety, loss of motivation, self-doubt, and social withdrawal. However, these findings should be interpreted as qualitative accounts rather than evidence of a causal relationship. The small exploratory sample and absence of standardized measures of sleep quality and mental health prevent statistical generalization. Nevertheless, the findings provide meaningful insights into how university students experience academic demands and how these demands may influence their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

Effects on Sleep Quality and Mental Health: Existentialist Analysis

This section analyses academic tasks, sleep, mental health, social alienation and self-meaning through Existentialism, which focuses on personal choice, responsibility and the search for meaning.

i. Relationship Between Tasks and Students' Sleep Time

Heavy assignment loads and examination preparation affected sleep duration and quality.

Students frequently slept late or stayed awake to meet deadlines, although some used more flexible time-management approaches. Different choices produced different sleep and stress outcomes.

Table 2: Relationship between tasks and sleep time

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Freedom of choice in task management	Students used different approaches; some completed work early while others delayed it.	“I always take things easy. I do every assignment at the last minute and still manage to complete it before the deadline.” (B)
Individual responsibility for well-being	Students reduced sleep to meet academic demands, causing fatigue and poor concentration.	“When assignments and quizzes overlap, I sometimes sleep only three to four hours a day to meet the deadline.” (H)
Self-awareness and student identity	Some recognised procrastination as a primary cause of sleep disruption.	“If I delay my work, I eventually become stressed because there is too much to do.” (D)

Most informants said assignments, presentations and examination preparation disrupted their daily sleep patterns. They often stayed awake until early morning, and some remained awake all night during periods of intense workload. Irregular and insufficient sleep caused physical fatigue, difficulty concentrating in class and reduced productivity. From an Existentialist perspective, these outcomes reflect freedom in managing time and tasks together with responsibility for the consequences of choices such as procrastinating or sacrificing sleep.

ii. Effects of Academic Workload on Mental Health

Continuous academic demands produced emotional pressure and affected motivation, confidence and perceptions of personal ability.

Table 3: Effects on mental health

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Emotional pressure	Assignments, quizzes and examinations caused prolonged pressure and difficulty regulating emotion.	“Prolonged stress and anxiety about quiz questions.” (F)
Loss of learning motivation	Peak workload caused mental exhaustion and reduced interest in academic tasks.	“I lose the motivation to study before an examination.” (B)
Self-doubt	Sustained pressure led students to question their abilities and chosen fields.	“I question whether I chose the right path. Is nursing really for me?” (A)

Effects of academic workload on sleep quality

The thematic analysis identified sleep disruption as a prominent consequence of academic demands. Informants reported sleeping late, staying awake until early morning and occasionally remaining awake throughout the night to complete assignments or prepare for examinations. Insufficient and irregular sleep was associated with physical fatigue, daytime sleepiness, reduced concentration during lectures, and lower learning productivity. Informants commonly prioritized assignment completion over adequate rest when several deadlines occurred within a short period. Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrated that individual practices affected sleep outcomes.

Effects on mental health

Academic workload was also associated with emotional and psychological challenges. The main themes included prolonged stress, anxiety, mental exhaustion, loss of motivation and self-doubt. One informant described experiencing “prolonged stress and anxiety about quiz questions,” while another reported losing the motivation to study before examinations. Persistent academic pressure also influenced some informants’ confidence in their abilities and choice of study program. These experiences suggest that academic pressure affected more than temporary emotional states. For some informants, it influenced their academic identity, perceived competence, and sense of direction. Sleep deprivation may have further intensified these experiences by contributing to fatigue, impaired concentration and difficulty completing academic work.

iii. Social Alienation and Students’ Sense of Self

High workload reduced opportunities for social interaction and influenced students’ perceptions of meaning and identity.

Table 4: Social alienation and sense of self

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Social alienation	Heavy workload reduced time with friends and increased loneliness.	“I have to decline invitations from friends because of the assignments and other work that must be completed.” (E)
Search for meaning	Some viewed university as a pathway for themselves, their families and the future.	“My presence at university is for myself, my future and my family.” (A)
Pressure to meet expectations	University life became centred on tasks and examinations rather than exploration.	“Sometimes university no longer feels like a place to enjoy learning or explore myself; it feels more like having to meet every academic expectation.” (H)

Academic demands reduced time with friends, family, and the community, leaving some students socially isolated and questioning the purpose of university life. From an Existentialist perspective, this reflects alienation: individuals feel separated from social life and experience conflict because academic routines focus heavily on performance and deadlines.

Institutional Responsiveness and the Academic System: Humanist Analysis

This section considers whether universities, lecturers, and assessment systems recognize students’ physical and mental limits. Humanism requires students to be treated as people with emotions, needs, limits, and potential, rather than as academic results.

i. Responsiveness to Students’ Physical and Mental Limits

Informants expressed mixed views. Some lecturers were caring and helpful, but informants also reported inconsistent sensitivity and overlapping assignments, quizzes, presentations, and deadlines.

Table 5: Perceptions of institutional and lecturer responsiveness

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Lecturer concern and support	Some lecturers were open, helpful, provided explanations, resources and advice.	“The lecturers help my classmates and me a great deal. They are open to students asking about matters they do not understand.” (A)

Institutional support	Mentor-mentee programmes and counsellors were available.	“There is a mentor-mentee programme where learning concerns can be shared with a mentor, and students may contact a counsellor.” (A)
Inconsistent sensitivity	Not all lecturers recognised students’ actual capacities.	“Some are very understanding, while others seem less aware of students’ abilities and limits.” (H)
Poor coordination across courses	Overlapping deadlines created excessive pressure.	“Several courses set deadlines very close together, leaving students without enough space.” (H)

University and lecturer sensitivity was moderate rather than comprehensive. Supportive lecturers, mentoring, and counseling reflected humanistic values, but these measures did not fully resolve workload problems. Genuine concern must also appear in coordinated academic scheduling. If assessments continue to overlap, causing sleep loss and emotional distress, student well-being has not yet become a central consideration.

ii. Assessment Systems and Emotional Welfare

Respondents considered whether the distribution of assignments, quizzes, presentations and deadlines adequately protected emotional welfare.

Table 6: Assessment and emotional welfare

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Emotional welfare not fully protected	Most respondents felt the assessment system did not comprehensively consider emotional welfare.	“Honestly, I feel that students’ emotional welfare is still not fully considered.” (E)
Overlapping work and deadlines	Simultaneous tasks caused emotional pressure and difficulty managing time.	“Sometimes there are too many assignments and deadlines at once, and it becomes overwhelming.” (E)
Syllabus-centred assessment	Students focused on completing work instead of understanding knowledge deeply.	“It becomes more about ‘complete and submit’ than truly understanding.” (H)
Student self-management	Some believed students also had responsibility for managing emotions and avoiding delay.	“Students must learn to manage their own emotional difficulties and still complete the assigned work.” (B)

Most respondents believed that existing assessment arrangements did not fully consider emotional welfare. Overlapping deadlines, presentations, and examinations caused students to feel rushed, lose sleep, and struggle to focus. When assessment becomes dominated by task completion, deep learning may be displaced by a ‘complete and submit’ mentality. This conflicts with Humanism, which views education as the development of knowledge, emotion, and personal potential. Barbayannis et al. (2022) similarly reported that greater academic stress is associated with poorer mental well-being.

Conflict Between Academic Achievement and Personal Well-being: National Education Philosophy Analysis

This section examines value conflicts between academic achievement and personal well-being through the National Education Philosophy, which promotes balanced physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual development.

i. Imbalance Between Academic Demands and Student Well-being

Table 7: Causes of imbalance in the academic system

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
Dominance of academic achievement	The system prioritised achievement over mental health, emotion and rest.	“Academic achievement is valued more highly than students’ mental health and rest.” (C)
Assignment overload and deadline clashes	Simultaneous demands disrupted sleep and increased pressure.	“Work arrives simultaneously from many courses; when combined, it becomes an overload.” (H)
Weak system support	Time management alone was insufficient without institutional awareness.	“Good time management is not enough if those responsible do not examine the real situation experienced by students.” (F)
Individual and self-management factors	Poor time management, self-regulation and environmental culture also contributed.	“Imbalance occurs when time management is disorganised.” (J)

Informants perceived an imbalance among the JERI dimensions. Academic achievement continued to receive greater priority than rest and mental health, contrary to the National Education Philosophy's commitment to harmonious development. Overlapping assignments forced students to sacrifice sleep and self-care. The causes were not solely individual; institutional coordination and sensitivity also influenced the academic ecosystem. Achieving the philosophy's aims, therefore, requires shared responsibility between students and educational institutions.

ii. Value Conflict Between CGPA and Personal Well-being

From an axiological perspective, sacrificing physical and emotional health for academic results raises questions about the true meaning of success.

Table 8: Sacrificing health for academic achievement

Theme	Summary	Respondent quotation
CGPA as a future investment	Some accepted limited sacrifice because a strong CGPA may improve career prospects.	“It is better to be tired now than tired later.” (A)
Health is more valuable than grades	Many believed achievement was not worthwhile if it seriously harmed health.	“Physical and mental health must be prioritised because we can succeed without risking our health.” (C)
Rejection of burnout culture	Students criticised the normalisation of extreme fatigue as evidence of commitment.	“The surrounding culture makes us feel that exhaustion proves we are serious.” (H)
Importance of balance	Academic success and health should not be treated as opposites.	“A balance between academics and personal well-being is more important than grades alone.” (E)

Informants experienced a clear value conflict over the meaning of university success. Some viewed CGPA as an investment in the future, but most rejected excessive harm to physical and mental health. Bakkar (2015) describes the measurement of success solely through academic performance as educational reductionism. The rejection of burnout culture shows that students are questioning the assumption that exhaustion is necessary for excellence.

The National Education Philosophy defines success through balanced intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development rather than grades alone.

Recommendations for Academic-System Improvement and Managing Pressure

The preceding findings reveal a gap between the ideals of the National Education Philosophy and students' experiences. Respondents proposed institutional reforms and individual coping strategies.

i. Improving the Structure of the Academic System

Table 9: Recommendations for improving the academic system

Theme	Practical justification	Respondent quotation
Workload coordination and assessment spacing	Coordinate deadlines and assessments across courses.	"There must be coordination between courses. If one course already has a major test that week, other courses should avoid setting a major deadline at the same time."
Deconstructing the Week 14 culture	Reject the concentration of submissions in the final teaching week.	"The final week before study week is always the busiest; every burden is concentrated into one week and students enter survival mode."
Reviewing the syllabus and assessment distribution	Reduce excessive content density and restructure assessment.	"Reduce the syllabus because approximately 50 diseases are studied in one semester."
Critiquing presentation-based teaching	Avoid relying on student presentations as the main teaching and examination resource.	"Learning from the lecturer becomes students having to be lecturers for themselves and others."

Informants did not seek lower academic standards; they asked for improved planning and implementation. Coordinated workload and assessment spacing would recognize student well-being. The concentration of submissions in Week 14 contributed to severe pressure and sleep disruption. Respondents also questioned the educational effectiveness of excessive student-presentation-based teaching, which requires students both to master content and teach classmates.

ii. Student Adjustment Strategies

Table 10: Student adjustment strategies

Strategy	Description	Respondent quotation
Proactive time management and prioritisation	Arrange tasks by priority and avoid procrastination.	"I will improve my habit of delaying work and complete assignments earlier so that I am not stressed on the submission day."
Personal boundaries	Set limits on working time and protect adequate sleep.	"I try to force myself to stop at a certain time even when the work is unfinished."
Energy-recovery mechanisms	Use free time to rest, socialise and restore physical and mental energy.	"I use the weekend to complete unfinished work and also recover with sufficient rest."

Maladaptive coping	A minority continued to prioritise academic work over rest.	“Prioritise academics; sleep can be replaced later.”
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Most respondents recognized the importance of balancing academics and personal well-being. Planning, prioritization, and protecting sleep reflect attempts to manage pressure more effectively. Rest, social activity, and recovery time support long-term physical and mental health and align with the National Education Philosophy. Nevertheless, a minority still normalized sacrificing sleep, indicating that an achievement-first culture remains influential.

CONCLUSION

Academic pressure, sleep disruption, and mental-health challenges were closely related to an imbalance between academic demands and personal well-being. Analysis through Existentialism, Humanism, and the National Education Philosophy demonstrates that the issue arises from both individual behavior and the structures and cultures of higher education. Addressing the issue requires cooperation between institutions and students. Institutions should improve the coordination of assignments, assessment structures, and teaching methods. Students should strengthen time management, self-care, and balanced lifestyle practices. The physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of JERI should guide student development, enabling academic excellence without sacrificing well-being. Through a more holistic approach, higher education institutions can develop graduates who are academically capable, healthy, balanced, and able to contribute positively to society and the nation.

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