Addressing The Mental Health Needs of Non-Local University Students: Gaps and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Living away from home during university years presents both opportunities and emotional challenges for students. This study aims to explore the mental health experiences of students who reside far from their families while pursuing higher education. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 students aged 18-22 years, purposively selected from various faculties. Thematic analysis revealed several recurring issues, including homesickness, social isolation, academic pressure, and limited access to mental health services. Many participants reported difficulties in adapting to independent living, especially when emotional support from family was unavailable. Students also expressed hesitation in utilizing available university counseling services due to stigma and lack of information. However, those who maintained regular communication with their families or developed peer support networks exhibited better emotional resilience. These findings suggest that emotional well-being is strongly connected to social relationships, living environment, and institutional support systems. The study recommends that universities implement proactive strategies such as emotional wellness workshops, inclusive peer networks, and improved promotion of mental health services. Strengthening mental health support is essential for enhancing both academic performance and the overall quality of life for students living away from home.

1. Introduction

Living away from home during university years presents both opportunities and challenges for many students. For students who come from different regions or even other countries, the process of adapting to campus life is often accompanied by feelings of homesickness, difficulties in managing independent living, and increasing academic pressure. The transition from the familiar home environment to a new setting, both geographically and socially, can significantly impact students' mental health. This situation is further exacerbated by the lack of

emotional support from family, which cannot always be present to provide assistance when needed[1].

Students living away from home often face mental health issues that are not immediately visible but profoundly affect their quality of life. Common problems include loneliness, anxiety, stress, and even depression[2,3]. Furthermore, low awareness among students regarding the importance of mental health and the stigma attached to using university counseling services can worsen the situation. Mental health services at universities are often underutilized, despite research showing that effective psychological support can improve students' emotional well-being and academic success[4].

Previous studies indicate that students living away from home tend to have more difficulty managing their emotions, especially when faced with intense academic challenges[5]. Without a strong support system, such as family or close friends, these students are more vulnerable to mental health issues. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the mental health conditions of students living far from home is essential in identifying more effective ways to support them, both on a personal and institutional level.

This study aims to explore the mental health experiences of students living away from their families while pursuing higher education. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study investigates how students cope with emotional and psychological challenges arising from independent living on campus. It also analyzes the factors influencing their mental health, including social relationships, family support, access to mental health services, and pressures during university life[6].

The research questions in this study are: What mental health experiences do students who live far from their families face, and what are the main challenges they encounter in managing their mental health? Furthermore, how do students adapt to campus life away from home, and what support do they expect from the university in addressing these challenges? The purpose of this study is to identify the mental health issues faced by students living away from home, as well as to understand the adaptation mechanisms they employ in dealing with emotional and social challenges[7]. This study also aims to provide recommendations regarding policies and

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[1] Syed Gufran Sadiq Zaidi and others, 'A Qualitative Study on the Effects of Homesickness on Mental Health and Sleep Among Newly Admitted Students Residing in Hostels in Public Universities of Punjab, Pakistan', *Journal of Health and Rehabilitation Research*, 2025, 1–6 <https://doi.org/10.61919/jhrr.v5i2.1760>.

[2] Ilaria Riboldi and others, 'Mental Health and Loneliness in University Students: A Structural Equation Modelling Comparing Italy and The UK', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 2025 <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640251346273>.

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[5] Syed Gufran Sadiq Zaidi and others.

[6] Soroush Ansari Lari, Maya Salem Zumot, and Salim Fredericks, 'Navigating Mental Health Challenges in International University Students: Adapting to Life Transitions', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1574953>.

[7] Lena Sanci and others, 'Towards a Health Promoting University: Descriptive Findings on Health, Wellbeing and Academic Performance amongst University Students in Australia', *BMC Public Health*, 22.1 (2022), 2430 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14690-9>.

strategies that universities can implement to improve the emotional well-being of students living away from home[8].

By understanding the factors that affect students' mental health, this study is expected to provide insights for universities and policymakers in designing better support programs for non-local students. These include improving access to counseling services, developing peer support networks, and creating a campus environment that is more inclusive and supportive of students' mental health. In addition, this study will contribute to the development of mental health theory for students, especially those living far from their families. The findings of this study are expected to create a broader understanding of the relationship between students' academic, social, and emotional life, and the importance of a more holistic approach to supporting their well-being[9].

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the mental health experiences of students living away from their families during their university years. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the personal and emotional challenges these students face, which quantitative methods may not fully capture. By using this method, the study aims to gather rich, descriptive data on the social, emotional, and psychological aspects of their experiences, focusing on individual narratives and perceptions[10].

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 15 undergraduate students aged 18–22 years, purposively selected from various faculties at a university. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria, such as their experience of living away from their families and their willingness to share personal experiences regarding mental health. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed flexibility, enabling the researchers to probe deeper into responses and explore topics that emerged during the conversation. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting to ensure participants felt safe and open to sharing sensitive information.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that is particularly suited to qualitative research as it allows for identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts to uncover common issues, challenges, and coping mechanisms reported by the participants. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with the researchers constantly refining their understanding of the data and emerging themes. This method provided a detailed and nuanced view of the students' mental health experiences, facilitating the development of recommendations for institutional support strategies[11].

[8] Aiko Deocades and others, 'Adjustment Problems and Coping Strategies of State University Students Living Away from Home', *EIKI Journal of Effective Teaching Methods*, 3.2 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.59652/jetm.v3i2.374>.

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[11] Antonia Rich and others, 'The Experiences of Students With Mental Health Difficulties At Medical School: A Qualitative Interview Study', *Medical Education Online*, 29.1 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10872981.2024.2366557>.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Mental Health Challenges Faced by Non-Local Students

The findings of this study revealed several key mental health challenges faced by students living away from their families during their university years. The most prevalent issue reported was homesickness, with many participants describing a strong longing for their families and familiar home environments[12]. This emotional distress often resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly during critical academic periods[13]. As students were unable to regularly visit home, they found it difficult to manage the emotional void, which in turn negatively affected their academic performance and social interactions.

Another significant challenge was the pressure of independent living. Many students, particularly those who had not previously lived away from home, struggled with the demands of self-sufficiency. This included managing finances, handling daily chores, and coping with the absence of familial emotional support[14]. A lack of preparedness for independent living led to heightened stress and anxiety among several participants. For many, the sudden responsibility of managing their own lives while simultaneously meeting academic expectations was overwhelming, further exacerbating their mental health challenges.

Moreover, academic pressure emerged as a critical source of stress. Students reported feeling an increased sense of responsibility to perform well, particularly as they feared disappointing their families who had invested significantly in their education[15]. This pressure was intensified by the inability to easily communicate their struggles with family members, leading to a sense of disconnection. As a result, many students described experiencing anxiety and a decline in self-esteem, as they felt they were constantly falling short of expectations.

3.2. Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies

In response to the challenges they faced, participants in this study employed various coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies. A significant finding was that students who maintained regular communication with their families exhibited better emotional resilience. Weekly phone calls, video chats, and social media interactions helped reduce feelings of homesickness and maintain a sense of connection to their familial support system. These students reported feeling more emotionally supported and less isolated, even though they were physically distant from their families.

However, not all students were able to maintain such communication. Some participants, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with less access to technology, struggled to stay in touch with their families. For these students, the lack of regular communication deepened feelings of isolation and exacerbated their mental health difficulties. The study

[12] Syed Gufran Sadiq Zaidi and others.

[13] Konstantina Vasileiou and others, 'Coping with Loneliness at University: A Qualitative Interview Study with Students in the UK', *Mental Health & Prevention*, 13 (2019), 21–30 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2018.11.002>.

[14] Soroush Ansari Lari, Maya Salem Zumot, and Salim Fredericks, 'Navigating Mental Health Challenges in International University Students: Adapting to Life Transitions', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1574953>.

[15] Michaela C. Pascoe, Sarah E. Hetrick, and Alexandra G. Parker, 'The Impact of Stress on Students in Secondary School and Higher Education', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25.1 (2020), 104–12 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>.

revealed that a strong family support system was a crucial determinant of emotional well-being for students living away from home.

Peer support networks also played a pivotal role in coping with emotional challenges. Students who formed close friendships with peers in similar situations reported feeling less alone and more able to manage the stresses of university life. These peer networks provided a sense of belonging and emotional validation, which was especially important for students who lacked a family support system. Peer groups also became informal outlets for discussing mental health struggles, which further alleviated feelings of loneliness and stress[16].

In addition to social support, some students engaged in individual coping strategies such as physical exercise, creative hobbies, and seeking professional help. Participation in campus activities, including sports and cultural events, allowed students to build social connections and divert attention from academic pressures. Creative outlets, such as drawing or writing, provided students with ways to express and manage their emotions. Some students, particularly those who had experienced significant mental distress, sought out counseling services on campus. However, these services were underutilized by many due to stigma and a lack of awareness about the available resources.

3.3. Institutional Support and Recommendations for Improvement

The study's findings indicate that while universities provide some support mechanisms for mental health, these services often remain underused by students living away from home. The main barriers identified were stigma surrounding mental health issues and a lack of awareness about the availability of counseling services. Students expressed a reluctance to seek help, fearing that it might reflect poorly on their academic or personal capabilities. Additionally, many were not well-informed about how to access these services or the range of support available, which limited their willingness to reach out.

The lack of institutional promotion and targeted outreach regarding mental health services emerged as a significant gap. Several participants highlighted that they were unaware of the counseling services available on campus until they sought help independently[17]. As a result, many students suffered in silence, believing that mental health struggles were a personal weakness rather than a common issue that could be addressed with proper support.

To address these gaps, universities should implement proactive strategies aimed at increasing mental health awareness and reducing stigma. One recommendation is to offer emotional wellness workshops and seminars during orientation sessions to equip students with the knowledge and tools to manage their mental health. These workshops could focus on coping strategies, stress management, and building resilience, and could also highlight the availability of support services. Additionally, fostering inclusive peer networks could serve as a preventative measure against mental health issues, as these networks can provide students with a support system and help normalize discussions around mental health.

Improving the accessibility and visibility of mental health services on campus is another critical step. Universities should invest in marketing and outreach efforts to ensure that all students are aware of the counseling services available to them. This could include digital campaigns, social media posts, and informational flyers distributed throughout the campus. By

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[16] Ligia Espinoza Murillo and José David Rodríguez Chaves, 'Homesickness in First-Year Students at a Costa Rican Public University', *Repertorio Americano*, 34, 2024, 1–23 <https://doi.org/10.15359/ra.1-34.11>.

[17] Anne Skoglund and others, 'Students' Descriptions about Experiences Beneficial to Mental Health - a Thematic Analysis', *BMC Public Health*, 25.1 (2025), 685 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-21846-w>.

reducing the stigma and increasing awareness, students may feel more comfortable seeking help and utilizing these resources.

The findings of this study have significant implications for universities seeking to support the mental health of non-local students. Strengthening mental health services, offering regular emotional wellness programs, and creating inclusive peer networks will go a long way in fostering a supportive environment for students who face the challenges of living away from home. These efforts are not only essential for improving students' emotional well-being but also for enhancing their overall academic performance and quality of life during their university years.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by non-local university students, particularly those related to homesickness, social isolation, academic pressure, and limited access to mental health services. The findings highlight the crucial role of familial and peer support in enhancing students' emotional resilience, with regular communication with family and strong social networks being key coping mechanisms. However, barriers such as stigma and a lack of awareness about available counseling services remain substantial obstacles, preventing many students from seeking the help they need.

To address these challenges, universities must implement proactive strategies to promote mental health services, reduce stigma, and foster supportive peer networks. By creating a more inclusive and informed environment, institutions can significantly improve the emotional well-being of students living away from home, thereby enhancing their overall university experience and academic performance. Strengthening mental health support systems is not only vital for individual well-being but also for cultivating a more positive and resilient student community.

5. Acknowledgment

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