

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mental health and well-being of students at a South Korean university, using private universities as a case study. The research aims to identify common stressors affecting students, assess their awareness and utilization of mental health support services, and propose strategies to enhance student well-being. A quantitative research approach was employed, and data were collected through an online structured survey distributed to 200 students from various academic departments, of which 163 valid responses were analyzed. The survey consisted of closed-ended questions designed to assess perceived stress levels, common stress factors, coping strategies, and awareness and use of university-based mental health services. The findings reveal moderate to low levels of emotional well-being among many students and highlight academic pressure as a major source of stress. Despite the availability of mental health services, utilization remains limited due to lack of awareness and cultural stigma. The study recommends increasing mental health literacy, improving the visibility and accessibility of counseling services, and implementing proactive well-being initiatives. Faculty engagement and peer-led support programs are also suggested to foster a supportive campus culture. By focusing on private universities, this study contributes to the broader discourse on student mental health and supports the adoption of a whole-institution approach to promoting mental health and well-being in higher education.

Keywords: Higher education, Stress, Student mental health and well-being, Support services, South Korea, University students.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mental health and well-being have become critical concerns in higher education institutions globally. University students are increasingly exposed to a variety of stressors, including academic pressure, social isolation, financial insecurity, and the challenges of cultural adaptation, particularly for international students. These factors can significantly impact students' emotional well-being, academic performance, and overall university experience (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Lipson et al., 2024). Despite growing awareness of student mental health, there remains a lack of institution-specific evidence within internationalised university contexts in South Korea, which provides the rationale for undertaking this research. At Korean universities, these issues are particularly relevant due to diverse student populations and international learning environments. Students frequently report heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Eisenberg et al., 2009), yet many remain unaware of, or reluctant to

access, available mental health resources. Cultural stigma and limited accessibility of information further contribute to the underutilization of support services (Lipson et al., 2022).

This study aims to assess the mental health status of students at private universities by identifying the most common sources of stress, evaluating students' awareness and usage of university-based mental health support services, and proposing actionable strategies to improve student wellbeing across campus. Using a quantitative research design, structured survey data were collected from undergraduate students across various academic departments. The findings indicate that academic pressure, financial concerns, and social adjustment challenges are the primary contributors to student stress, while awareness and utilisation of mental health support services remain limited. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on a globally oriented Korean university, offering context-specific insights that are currently underrepresented in the literature. The study contributes to both institutional policy development and broader discussions on student mental health by supporting a whole-institution approach to well-being that emphasises prevention, accessibility of support services, and the promotion of everyday psychological resilience within higher education.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Academic Stress and Pressure in Higher Education

University students' mental health has become a major global concern in recent years (Bantjes et al., 2022). In higher education research, mental health is commonly defined as a state of psychological wellbeing that enables individuals to cope with academic and personal stressors, function effectively, and participate productively in their educational environment (World Health Organization, 2023). Closely related to this concept, student wellbeing refers to a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, psychological, social, and academic functioning (Duraku et al., 2024).

Empirical studies indicate a growing prevalence of mental health challenges among university students. Lipson et al. (2022), drawing on data from the National Healthy Minds Study (2013–2021), reported that more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health condition. Due to the widespread nature of these concerns, some scholars have described the situation as a “mental health crisis” in higher education (Hernández-Torrano & Ibrayeva, 2024).

Within this literature, academic stress is understood as psychological strain arising from academic demands such as examinations, workload, performance expectations, and time pressure. These stressors are often intensified by the structural characteristics of higher education systems that emphasise high academic achievement, competitive grading, and continuous performance evaluation. In many national contexts, including South Korea, university education is shaped by outcome-driven systems that prioritise grades, rankings, and graduation rates, contributing to sustained academic pressure among students (Putwain, 2007).

Research suggests that transitions into university life, particularly for students studying outside their home countries, are associated with increased stress, emotional challenges, and psychological distress (Lari et al., 2025). Supporting this, Donaldson et al. (2023) found that approximately 35% of college freshmen report symptoms consistent with diagnosable mental health disorders. In highly competitive educational systems, first-year students may experience heightened pressure to adapt quickly to rigorous academic expectations while simultaneously developing social and professional identities.

At the national level, educational policies increasingly link student performance to institutional accountability, employability outcomes, and global university rankings. In South Korea, higher education policy has placed strong emphasis on academic excellence, graduate employability, and alignment with national economic goals (Hou et al., 2021). While such policies aim to enhance educational quality, they may also contribute to intensified competition, increased workload, and performance-related stress among students.

Mental health difficulties among university students are strongly associated with adverse academic outcomes. Eisenberg et al. (2021) demonstrated that poor mental health is linked to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. At the same time, growing industry demands and labour market uncertainty have amplified student anxiety regarding future employment. Employers increasingly expect graduates to

demonstrate not only academic achievement but also practical skills, international experience, and continuous self-development, which can heighten pressure and foster a culture of constant competition among students (Mutaufiq et al., 2025).

Despite the increasing availability of services, help-seeking behaviour defined as the use of formal mental health support services such as counselling or psychological assistance remains limited among students (Lipson et al., 2022). Cultural stigma is a significant barrier to help-seeking, particularly in South Korea. Lee and Choi (2022) found that stigma surrounding mental health substantially discourages Korean university students from accessing professional support services. This challenge is especially relevant within Korean universities, where cultural norms may limit open discussions of psychological distress. In addition, Yang et al., (2023) identified gaps in institutional mental health policies across South Korea and emphasised the need for culturally responsive and institution-specific mental health frameworks that address both academic pressures and broader structural influences on student wellbeing.

2.2 Mental Health Support Systems in Korean Universities

According to Kim et al. (2020) the traditional university mental health campaigns are often structured inefficiently. The transition to higher education represents a pivotal developmental period characterized by heightened academic, social, and financial stressors, rendering university students exceptionally vulnerable to the onset of psychological disorders (Koutra et al., 2024). Despite the documented rising prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among emerging adults, a persistent "treatment gap" remains, characterized by a widespread reluctance to utilize formal mental health services (Koutra et al., 2024).

To understand and mitigate this underutilization, empirical literature has increasingly focused on Mental Health Literacy (MHL) as a fundamental precursor to professional help-seeking (Yang et al., 2024). However, emerging evidence suggests that simply acquiring knowledge is insufficient; the cognitive pathway from literacy to proactive help-seeking is heavily complexed and obscured by multi-layered barriers, most notably social and self-stigma (Yang et al., 2023). Kim (2023) directly addresses this complexity by examining how these distinct dimensions of stigma mediate the relationship between MHL and help-seeking attitudes within the specific context of South Korean higher education.

2.3 Structural Infrastructure and the Mandate for Campus Counseling

In response to rising rates of psychological distress, depression, and academic burnout among emerging adults, South Korean higher education institutions have systematically expanded their institutional welfare systems (Kim & Yon, 2019; Choi, 2023, Kim & Lee, 2023). The primary structural mechanism for student mental health delivery is the Student Counseling Center (SCC), an entity mandated across almost all four-year universities in South Korea. These centers are theoretically designed to provide a comprehensive continuum of care, including: Initial Psychological Screening: Utilizing standardized diagnostic tools such as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Clinical Intervention: Offering individual psychotherapy, crisis counseling, and structured group therapy workshops. Psychological Referrals: Interfacing with external psychiatric clinics and local community mental health centers for students requiring high-risk clinical or pharmacological support.

Furthermore, in line with international higher education benchmarks, many Korean universities have attempted to transition toward proactive outreach models. This includes appointing faculty advisors as primary gates of detection and organizing peer-mentorship networks to flag early indicators of social withdrawal or severe academic decline among vulnerable students.

2.4 Role of Family, Peer, and Social Support Services

Numerous studies have demonstrated that family plays a significant role in supporting the mental health and social well-being of university students, particularly among international students who often face emotional, cultural, and academic challenges while studying abroad. Saad et al. (2023) found that family-related factors influence students' personal health and time management, highlighting the importance of family support in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and psychological well-being. This suggests that strong family connections can help international students cope with stress and adapt more effectively to university life. From

a public health perspective, Su et al. (2025) further emphasized that family support serves as a foundational element in promoting college students' well-being. In addition, studies on risk-taking behaviour and entrepreneurial intention revealed that positive outcomes are more likely to emerge when strong family support is present. Collectively, these findings indicate that emotional encouragement, guidance, and social support from family members contribute positively to international students' mental health, confidence, resilience, and overall social well-being.

Other than family support, Saad and Ali (2025) found that peers also play a crucial role as a social support system. The findings showed that peers were perceived as more approachable, trustworthy, emotionally available, and relatable because they shared similar academic experiences and challenges. Students particularly valued peer support through group discussions, sharing notes and study materials, emotional encouragement, collaborative learning, and informal social interactions. These peer relationships helped reduce stress, improve communication skills, strengthen confidence, and support struggling or shy students in adapting to university life.

Past study has highlighted that emotional intelligence factors, such as consciousness and transcendence, contribute positively to students' performance, adaptability, and transformative learning, ultimately supporting the development of well-rounded individuals (Saad et al., 2024). These findings suggest that support services which nurture students' emotional and psychological well-being can play an important role in strengthening international students' mental health, resilience, and social adjustment within the university environment. In addition, Saad et al. (2023) argued that a sustainable university ecosystem should demonstrate strong social responsibility in supporting students' holistic development. The scholars confirmed that emotional and spiritual intelligence positively influence instructors' service quality and effective classroom teaching, which contribute not only to students' academic achievement but also to their personal and professional growth. This indicates that comprehensive support services, including counselling, mentoring, and social integration initiatives, are essential in promoting international students' mental health and social well-being.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that family, peer, and social support services collectively play a vital role in promoting the mental health and social well-being of international university students. Family support provides emotional stability, guidance, and encouragement, which help students cope with academic pressure, cultural adjustment, and personal challenges while studying abroad. Strong family relationships also contribute to students' resilience, confidence, and ability to maintain a healthy balance between academic and personal life. In addition, peer support is equally important in reducing feelings of loneliness, stress, and social isolation among international students. Positive interactions with friends and classmates can foster a sense of belonging, emotional comfort, and social connectedness, enabling students to adapt more effectively to a new educational and cultural environment. Peer relationships also encourage collaborative learning, emotional sharing, and mutual understanding, which contribute positively to students' overall well-being. Furthermore, university social support services, including counselling, mentoring, academic guidance, and social integration programmes, serve as essential institutional mechanisms in supporting students' emotional and psychological needs. Previous studies highlighted that emotional and spiritual intelligence positively influence teaching quality, adaptability, and students' holistic development, reflecting the importance of a supportive university ecosystem. Therefore, the combined contributions of family, peers, and institutional support services are essential in strengthening international students' mental health, resilience, social adjustment, and overall quality of life in higher education settings.

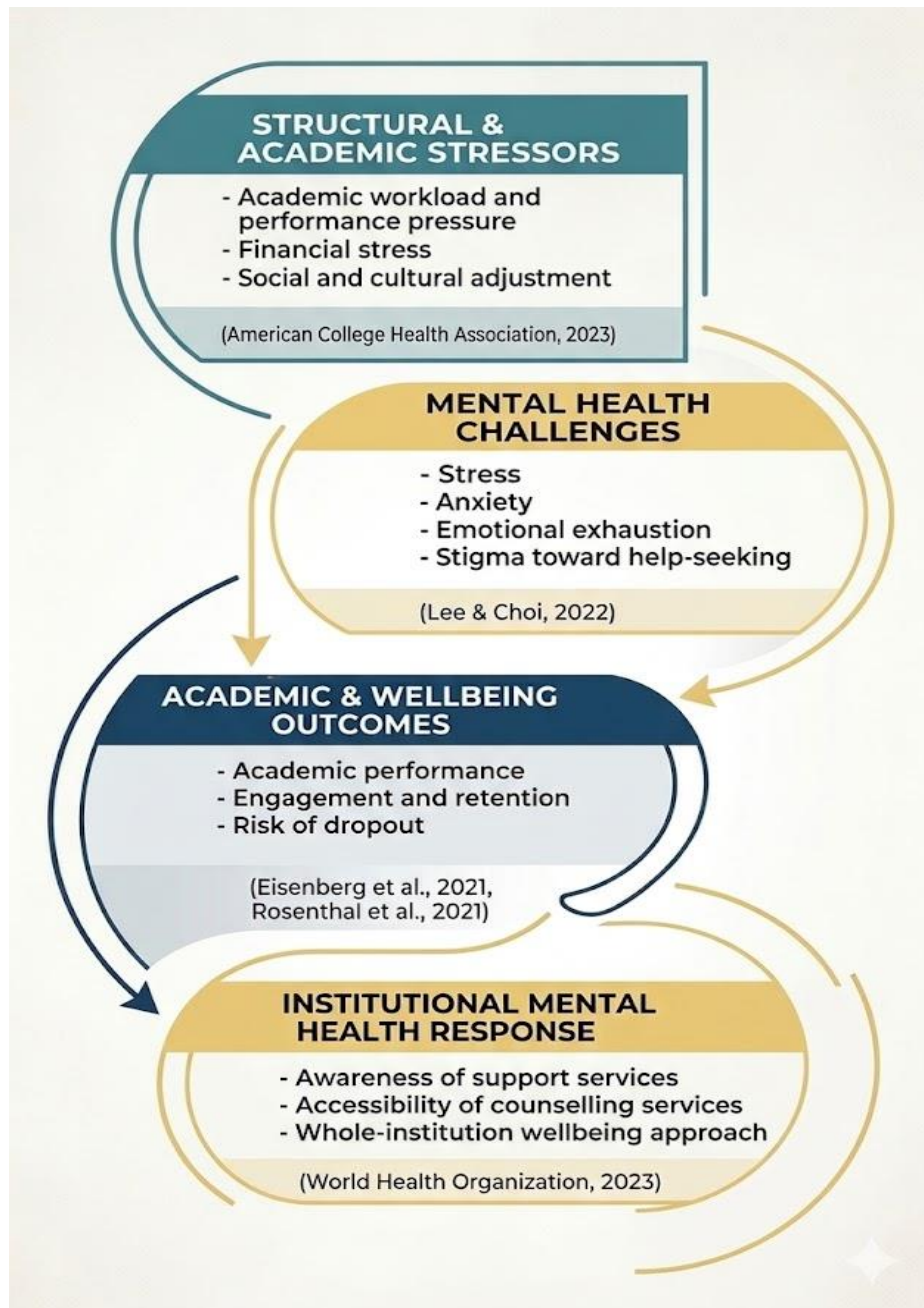


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework
(Source: Authors' work)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study focused on students from private universities as a case study to understand mental health issues within the context of international and local university students in South Korea. A structured online survey was chosen as the most suitable method to collect measurable data from students across different departments. The survey was designed to reflect students' personal experiences and perceptions, providing a broad understanding of their mental health conditions and challenges. The study employed a convenience sampling method due to the accessibility of participants and feasibility of reaching students through the distribution of the survey link through social media platforms accessible to private universities students. This approach allowed for voluntary participation from a diverse group of students across various departments, ensuring ease of access and a wider reach. The target population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students currently enrolled at the university during the data collection period. A total of 163 usable and responses were collected from April to June 2025.

The survey was created and conducted entirely online using Google Forms. It included multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions aimed at assessing different aspects of the students. Particularly, the questionnaire consisted of four sections covering demographic information, mental health conditions, stressors, coping strategies, and awareness of support services. Several items were adapted from previous mental health studies to enhance content validity. The online format facilitated easy access and encouraged higher participation rates. All responses were collected anonymously to protect participant confidentiality, and students were informed that their participation was voluntary. Before conducting the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the research complied with ethical standards for studies involving human subjects. In addition, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation before completing the survey. Descriptive statistical analysis, including frequencies and percentages, was used to summarise respondents' demographic profiles, mental health conditions, coping strategies, and awareness of support services. The analysis aims to provide actionable insights into the mental health challenges faced by the student body.

4.0 RESULTS

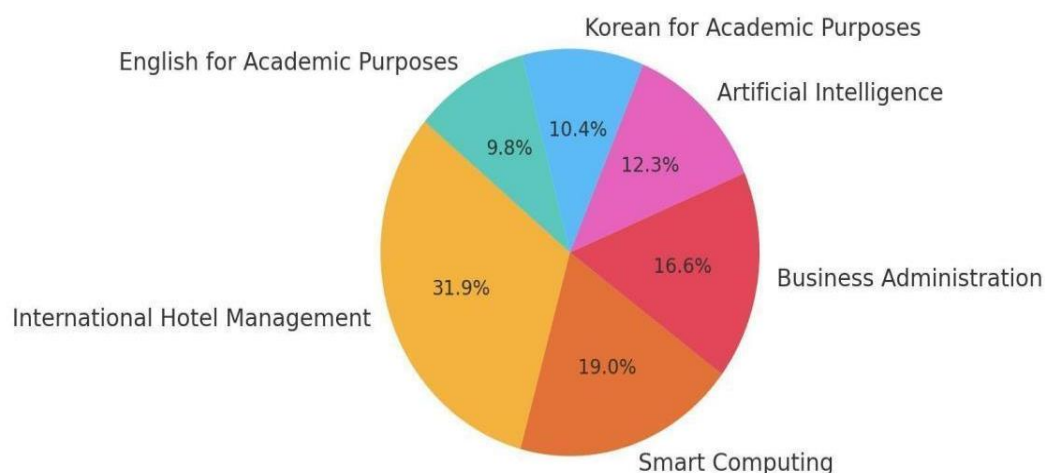
4.1 Students Well-being and Mental Health Evaluation

The analysis of quantitative data collected from 163 students at private university indicates significant concerns about students' mental health and overall well-being. While a proportion of students rated their mental health positively, the majority reported moderate to low levels of emotional well-being.

Academic pressure-both self-imposed and arising from university expectations-was identified as the primary source of stress. A substantial number of students reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and emotional exhaustion, alongside limited utilization of professional mental health support services.

Although many students were aware of mental health resources on campus, a significant proportion reported insufficient knowledge about how to access them. In addition, cultural stigma was identified as a major barrier to help-seeking, particularly among international students. As a result, most students relied on informal coping strategies, such as speaking with friends or engaging in hobbies, while only a small percentage sought formal counseling services. These findings highlight the need for strengthened institutional mental health support systems and improved accessibility and awareness of available services.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of respondents across various academic departments, with the majority being from International Hotel Management (31.9%), followed by Smart Computing (19.0%) and Business Administration (16.6%). Smaller but significant groups include students in Artificial Intelligence (12.3%),



followed by Korean for Academic Purposes (10.4%), and English for Academic Purposes (9.8%).

Fig. 2: Students distribution by department
(Source: Authors' work)

Figure 3 depicts the distribution of students by academic year level. The majority of students are classified as Juniors (31.9%) and Sophomores (28.2%), indicating that most students are in the mid-stages of their academic programs. Seniors account for 17.8%, Freshmen 12.3%, while the Graduating students 9.8%

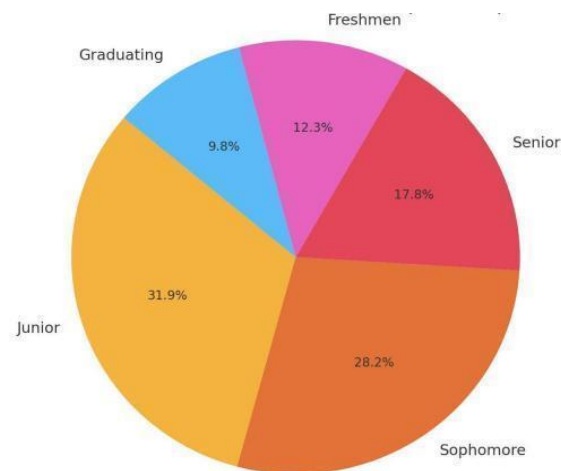


Fig. 3: Students year level distribution
(Source: Authors' work)

As shown in Figure 4 the summary of student mental health and wellbeing survey results. Student responses reveal important insights into mental health and well-being at private universities. Only 10.3% of students rated their overall well-being as excellent (9–10), while 31.0% rated it as good (7–8). The Majority (32.8%) described their well-being as moderate (5–6), with 17.2% reporting poor (3–4), and 8.6% indicating very poor (1–2) mental health status. Regarding awareness of mental health support services, 25.9% of students reported being aware of available services, whereas 43.1% were aware but uncertain about how to access them, and 31.0% were not aware at all.

Hence, 67.2% of students had considered seeking help for mental health concerns, only 15.5% had actually done so, highlighting a notable gap between awareness and action. In coping strategies, 62.1% relied on talking to friends or family, followed by 46.6% engaging in hobbies, and 31.0% exercising; notably, only 8.6% seeks professional help. Academic pressure was primarily self-imposed (44.8%), with 27.6% attributing pressure to academic performance, 17.2% from family, and 10.3% from peer comparisons. When asked how the university could improve mental health support, 40.8% recommended stress management workshops, 38.8% called for expanded counseling services, and 20.4% emphasized the need for increased awareness campaigns.

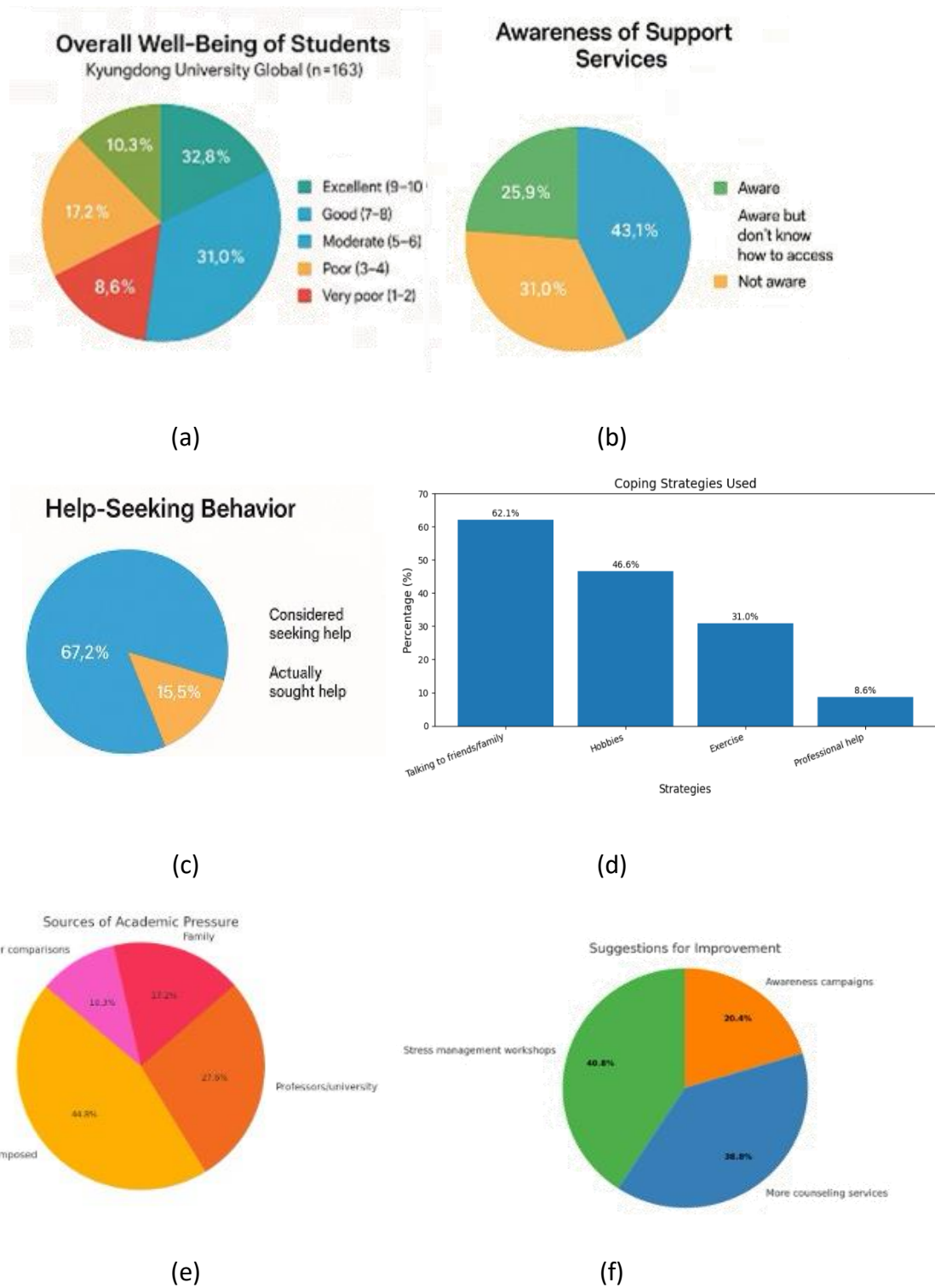


Fig. 4: Summary of student mental health and wellbeing survey
(Source: Authors' work)

5.0 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that university students experience considerable mental health challenges, consistent with global trends reported in higher education. Only 10.3% of respondents rated their overall well-being as excellent, while a substantial proportion (32.8%) reported moderate well-being, suggesting that mental health concerns remain prevalent among students. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies, which highlight increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional distress among university populations worldwide (American College Health Association, 2023; Bantjes et al., 2022).

From the perspective of international students studying at the private universities, these mental health challenges may extend beyond academic pressure alone. International students often experience additional psychological burdens related to cultural adjustment, language barriers, homesickness, financial concerns, and adaptation to unfamiliar educational systems. The process of balancing academic expectations while simultaneously navigating a foreign social and cultural environment may intensify emotional exhaustion and anxiety. This suggests that the moderate to low well-being levels reported in the study may also reflect broader adjustment difficulties commonly experienced among international student populations.

A key finding of this study is the significant role of social support systems in managing students' mental health. The results show that 62.1% of students rely primarily on family support, followed by support from friends and educators. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that strong social and familial support networks are associated with reduced psychological distress and improved emotional well-being among university students (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Lipson et al., 2024). Family support provides emotional stability and practical assistance, while peer support helps mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, which are common stressors in university life. For international students in particular, peer relationships may become especially important due to geographical separation from family members and familiar social environments. Friendships with peers from similar cultural backgrounds can provide emotional reassurance, a sense of belonging, and informal guidance in adapting to campus life abroad.

In addition, the findings suggest that engagement in positive coping activities contributes to better mental well-being. Approximately 46.6% of students reported participating in hobbies, and 31.0% engaged in physical exercise as stress-management strategies. These results are consistent with earlier studies indicating that active coping behaviors, including recreational activities and physical exercise, play a protective role against stress and emotional exhaustion (Duraku et al., 2024; Lazarewicz et al., 2025). For international students, participation in hobbies and social activities may also function as an adaptive mechanism for reducing acculturative stress and enhancing social integration within the university environment.

Despite the availability of support mechanisms, the results also point to gaps in awareness and utilization of formal mental health services. Although many students reported awareness of available support services, a substantial proportion remained uncertain about how to access them, while only a small percentage sought professional counseling. This observation reflects existing literature that identifies cultural stigma and limited mental health literacy as major barriers to help-seeking, particularly in South Korean university contexts. Among international students, additional barriers may include language difficulties, unfamiliarity with institutional procedures, and concerns about confidentiality or cultural misunderstanding during counseling sessions. In many Asian cultural contexts, seeking psychological assistance is still associated with social stigma or perceptions of personal weakness, which may discourage students from utilizing formal support services even when experiencing emotional distress.

The underutilization of institutional mental health services underscores the need for culturally sensitive and accessible mental health initiatives. Benchmarking these findings against previous studies highlights the importance of a whole-institution approach to student mental health. The World Health Organization (2023) emphasizes the integration of preventive, promotive, and responsive mental health strategies within educational institutions. Similarly, Eisenberg et al. (2021) demonstrate that inadequate mental health support is linked to poorer academic performance and higher dropout risks, reinforcing the academic implications of unmet mental health needs. These implications may be even more significant for international students, whose academic success is often closely tied to scholarship requirements, visa conditions, and long-term career aspirations.

Based on these findings, universities should strengthen support networks by promoting family engagement, peer mentoring programs, and meaningful professor–student interactions. For institutions hosting international students, mental health initiatives should also incorporate multilingual communication, culturally responsive counseling approaches, and orientation programs that improve awareness of available support services. Increasing mental health awareness through educational workshops and campaigns can further reduce stigma and encourage early help-seeking. Expanding and publicizing campus mental health services, including counseling and group-based interventions, is also essential. Implementing these evidence-based strategies may contribute to improved student well-being and foster a more resilient, inclusive, and supportive academic environment for both domestic and international students.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the growing importance of addressing mental health and well-being among students in Korean higher education institutions. The findings demonstrate that a considerable proportion of students experience moderate to low levels of emotional well-being, with academic pressure emerging as a major contributor to stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. However, the study also suggests that mental health challenges among students, particularly international students, extend beyond academic demands and are closely associated with cultural adjustment, social integration, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with institutional support systems. These interconnected challenges may significantly affect students' emotional resilience, academic performance, and overall university experience. Although mental health support services are available within the university, the findings reveal a substantial gap between awareness and actual utilization of these services. Many students reported uncertainty regarding how to access professional support, while cultural stigma and limited mental health literacy further discouraged help-seeking behaviour. Consequently, students were more likely to rely on informal coping strategies, such as peer support, family communication, hobbies, and recreational activities, rather than formal counseling services. While these coping mechanisms may provide temporary emotional relief, they may not adequately address more severe or long-term psychological concerns.

The findings therefore underscore the need for a more comprehensive and culturally responsive institutional approach to student mental health. Universities should strengthen mental health awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and improving mental health literacy among both domestic and international students. Counseling services should be made more accessible, multilingual, and culturally sensitive to accommodate the diverse backgrounds and needs of the student population. In addition, integrating mental health education into academic environments, expanding peer mentoring initiatives, and equipping faculty members with early intervention skills may contribute to a stronger and more supportive campus support system. Ultimately, promoting student mental health should not be viewed solely as a welfare initiative, but as an essential component of academic success, student retention, and institutional sustainability. By continuously evaluating student needs and adapting support services accordingly, the private university can foster a more inclusive, compassionate, and resilient academic environment that supports the overall well-being and long-term success of its students.

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