

RESEARCH SUMMARY



MENTAL HEALTH

YAYASAN
HASANAH

 A foundation of Khazanah Nasional



**The Impact of the COVID-19
Pandemic on Students' Mental
Health, Psychological Well-being
and Psychosocial Well-being
in Malaysia**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Summary Reports are abbreviated research documents commissioned by Yayasan Hasanah to support evidence-based policy recommendations for its impact areas and the nation. These reports may not necessarily reflect the official views of Yayasan Hasanah.

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INTRODUCTION

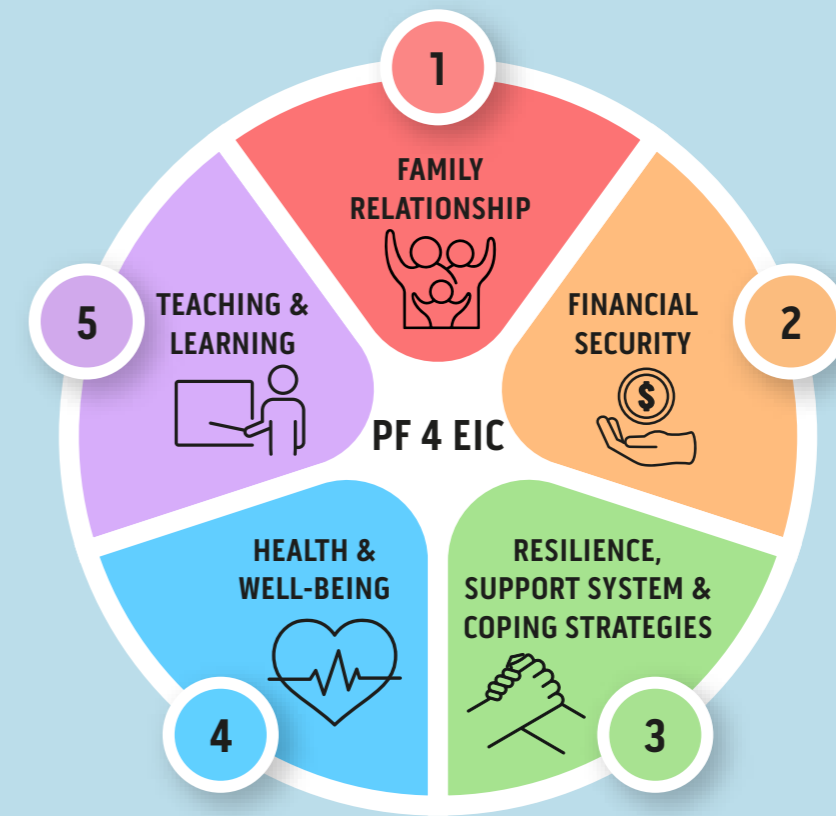
In the aftermath of COVID-19, an abundance of studies from the West dissected the social, economic and political impacts of COVID-19 on the general public, with significant emphasis on school-going children and adolescents.

In Malaysia, however, studies on COVID-19 largely revolved around the virus, its impacts, mitigation strategies, health implications, outbreak and control measures as well as interventions and implications of the pandemic in Malaysia. A few studies focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the education system, in particular students' mental health and well-being. However, most of these focused on students at the tertiary level, with little research done on the pandemic's impact on primary and secondary school students.

As our youth are the future stakeholders and nation-builders of Malaysia, it is imperative to close the research gap concerning the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of Malaysia's primary and secondary school students.

This study, commissioned by Yayasan Hasanah, seeks to examine and explore the factors affecting the mental health, psychological and psychosocial well-being of adolescents and youth across Malaysia. Areas explored included the relationship between mental health and psychosocial well-being, predictors of psychosocial well-being and influences of school, family, society and individual factors on students' mental health.

A total of 2,356 students (Primary Six to Form Six) from 14 states across Malaysia responded to the questionnaire from June to September 2022. Focus group discussions were also held with parents and teachers cum school counsellors for qualitative data.



KEY FINDINGS

Research findings revealed that students' mean scores for mental health, psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being are good. A significant correlation between the mental health, psychological well-being and psycho-social well-being of students was also discovered. The higher the levels of mental health and psychological well-being, the higher the level of psychosocial well-being.

Respondents were positive about the future and highly motivated to move past the pandemic and regain a sense of normalcy, which may be attributed to efforts by government ministries and NGOs in focusing on public health and mitigating the effects of COVID-19.

The study, however, found that many students had not yet processed the psychological trauma caused by COVID-19. Several demographic groups who indicated a need for greater mental health support were also identified, namely:

- Male students
- Malay (Muslim) students
- Students from B40 and T20 households
- Students located in the central, east coast and East Malaysia zones

This paper recommends using the developed PF 4 EIC psychosocial framework developed by the study's authors in a coordinated effort from government and community stakeholders (e.g. Health Ministry, Education Ministry, religious heads, community-based organisations, village heads and civil society) to mitigate future education crises.

The authors also suggest building public resilience through screening and education, implementing intervention programs in overall well-being (e.g. healthy lifestyle, mindfulness and self-regulation) and preparing education systems for creative, flexible teaching and learning in crises.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To examine and explore the factors affecting Malaysian primary and secondary students' mental health, psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being through the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as identify solutions for preparedness in future crises, the following research questions were established:

1. What is the students' level of **mental health** due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



2. What are the primary and secondary schools' students' level of **psychosocial well-being** due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



3. Are there any **significant relationships between students' mental health and their psychosocial well-being**?



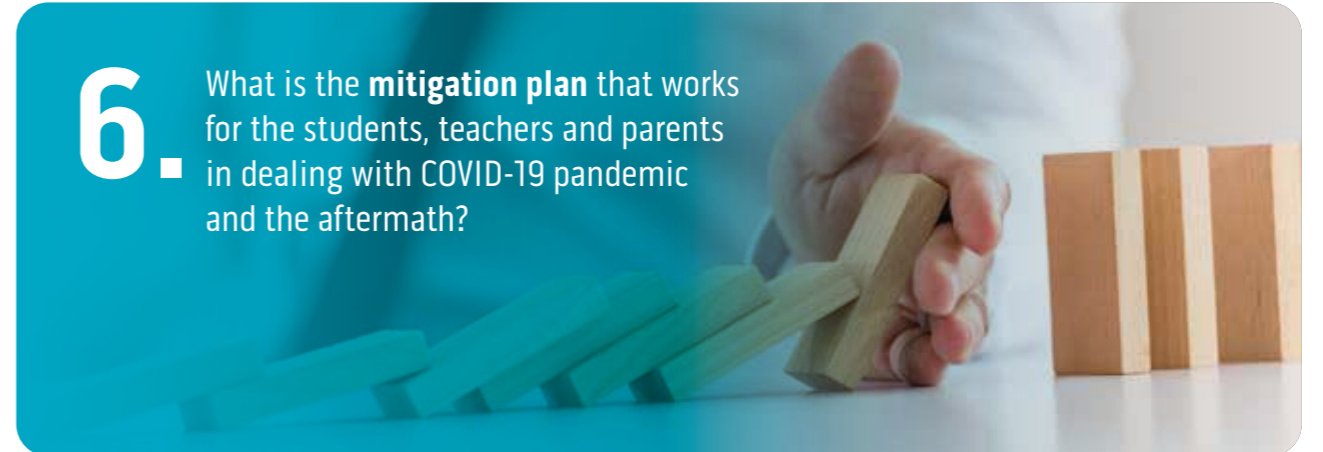
4. What are the **predictors** of the students' psychosocial well-being?



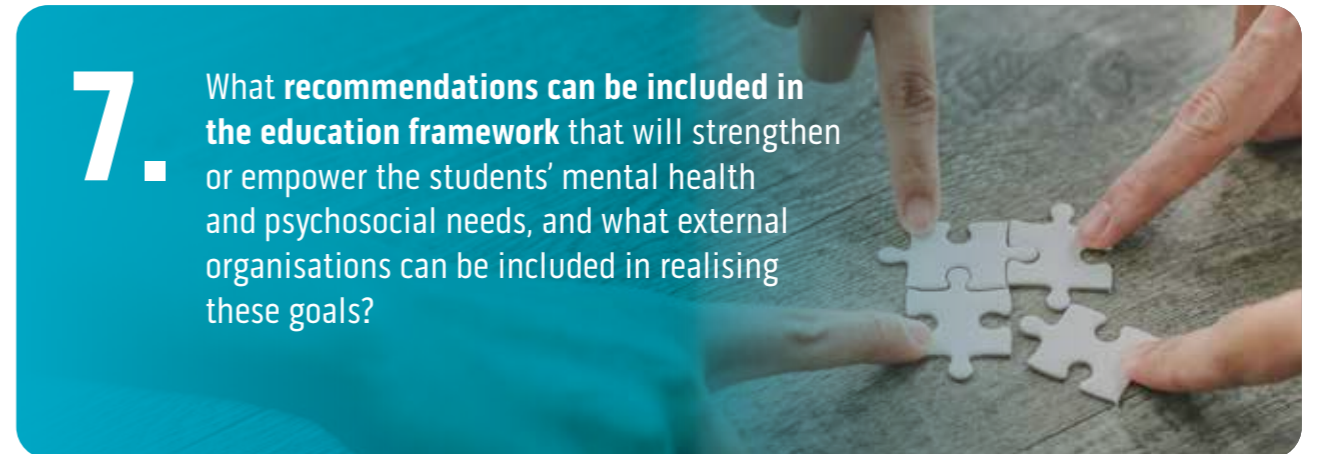
5. What are the **influences of school-related, family-related, society-related and personal-related factors** on the students' mental health and psychosocial well-being?



6. What is the **mitigation plan** that works for the students, teachers and parents in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath?



7. What **recommendations can be included in the education framework** that will strengthen or empower the students' mental health and psychosocial needs, and what external organisations can be included in realising these goals?



METHODOLOGY

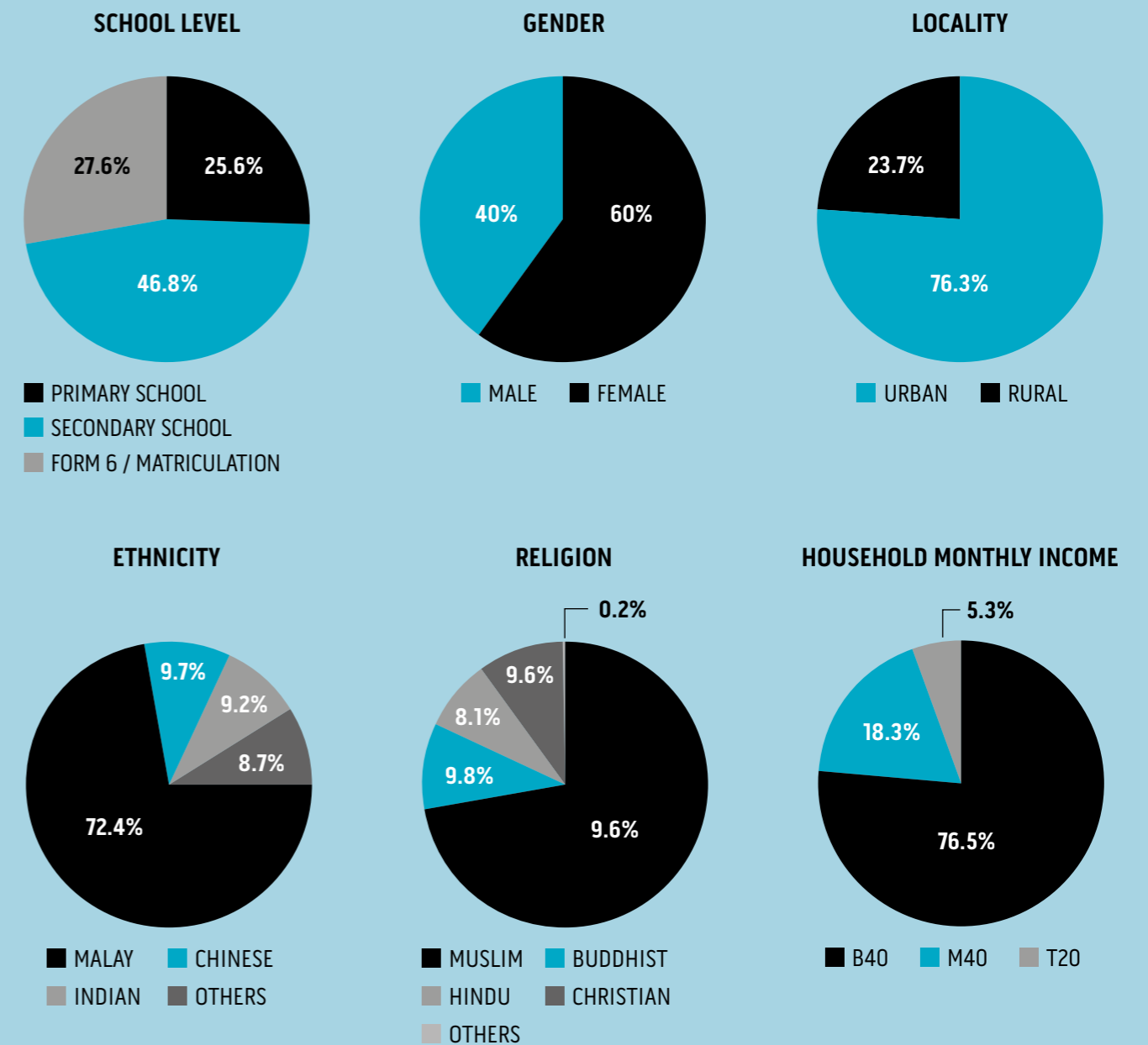
This study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches via a questionnaire for students complemented by in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, and school counsellors.

In total, 2,356 primary and secondary school students from across East and West Malaysia participated in the questionnaire, an overwhelming response from the originally targeted 1,800 students. Approval was obtained from the Education Ministry as well as respective state and district education departments to administer the questionnaires, which were distributed via teachers both in hardcopy form and online on Google Forms, consisting of 55 questions in four parts:



- 1 Demographic Data
- 2 Students' Level of Mental Health During COVID-19
- 3 Students' Level of Psychological Well-being (PWB)
- 4 Students' Level of Psychosocial Well-being

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

A total of 10 individuals were interviewed for qualitative data: five female teachers cum school counsellors and five parents from B40 families. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes and followed similar interview questions and protocols.

The school counsellors were aged between 25 and 45 years old, with experience from three to 17 years. Selected parents from B40 families were aged between 37 and 62 years old, with two to four children per family.

DATA ANALYSIS

Statistical analysis of the data was performed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) as well as the Pearson Correlation Coefficients, One Way ANOVA, independent t-tests and Multiple Regression Analyses for identifying predictors of students' psychological well-being.

Qualitative data were analysed according to Atlas.Ti and thematic analysis was employed to identify major and minor themes in the transcribed responses.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The pandemic revealed students' lack of psychological preparedness for a crisis and its impact, the struggle by households to adapt to online learning and the need for greater mental health support.



STUDENTS FROM B40 AND T20 HOUSEHOLDS REQUIRE GREATER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT.

Students' mental health was measured in two categories: 1) Anxiety and 2) Awareness and Precaution. Overall, students were found to display lower levels of anxiety but higher levels of awareness and precaution. It was also interesting to note that students from B40 and T20 (both ends of the economic spectrum) require greater monitoring for their mental health.

- Five main school-related factors affecting students' mental health were: internet access/use of gadgets, online learning, online class attendance and homework submission, students' emotions and adjustment to the new routine.
- Male students scored lower than female students in terms of mental health.
- Malay (Muslim) students' scores were below average, indicating that they may require greater support in managing their mental health.

STUDENTS AND PARENTS STRUGGLED TO PIVOT TO ONLINE LEARNING CITING THE LACK OF PROPER RESOURCES, POOR INTERNET CONNECTION AND UNAFFORDABILITY OF GADGETS

Study findings revealed that students and parents both struggled to adapt to online learning amid the pandemic. Several parents shared that their children developed anxiety and stress due to online learning and

not having a stable internet connection, while students themselves struggled with shortened class hours and an increased homework load.

- Several students found it difficult to focus or sit still throughout online classes, and others had to travel out of their homes for a stable internet connection.
- In one interview, a parent said that her child faced challenges viewing presentation slides on a mobile phone due to the screen's size.
- Several of the participants' families could not afford to provide each child with a gadget, resulting in them having to share, thus missing classes.



STUDENTS PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNPREPARED FOR THE PANDEMIC, WITH MANY YET TO PROPERLY PROCESS THE TRAUMA.

Students' psychological well-being was measured in two categories: 1) Trauma and 2) Coping. While the students generally displayed above-average levels of psychological well-being, findings suggest that many have yet to properly process psychological trauma faced as a result of COVID-19.

Students also scored poorly in the Coping construct, revealing that they were psychologically unprepared for the pandemic, loss of life and its impact on their

household income, lifestyle and family relationships. It is clear that further systematic measures addressing the psychological needs of different age groups are needed.

- Students from the B40 category displayed lower levels of psychological readiness.
- Students from rural areas scored better than their urban counterparts, indicating that students in urban areas may have faced added stressors due to movement restrictions and socio-economic issues.
- Emotional maturity may have played a part in students' ability to cope, as students from secondary schools and Form 6/Matriculation classes scored higher than other groups.



“A challenge I faced as a counsellor during the lockdown was only being able to counsel students via whatsapp. Whenever students shared problems or asked questions, we would not be able to see their facial expressions or body language. Were they sad or angry? We could not see their true reactions.” - Pn Aini, Counsellor

PARENTS NOTED A SHIFT TOWARDS NEGATIVE EATING, SLEEPING AND GAMING BEHAVIOUR.

The psychosocial well-being of students was measured in five categories: 1) Relationship with Family, 2) Financial Security, 3) Resilience, Support System and Coping, 4) Health and Well-being and 5) Teaching and Learning. In general, students indicated good levels of psychosocial well-being across all five categories.

However, several parents indicated that their children's sleeping (staying up late) and eating habits (less or more frequently) had changed during COVID-19, and that some children developed an addiction to online gaming, further affecting their health and well-being.

It is also important to note that Teaching and Learning scored the lowest, suggesting that more can be done by relevant stakeholders to improve the academic experience, facilities and learning environment in schools.

PARENTS FELT BURDENED BY ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO FOSTER LEARNING.

In our interviews with key stakeholders, it became starkly clear that COVID-19's impact had affected the role that parents played in their children's learning. Parents with young children reported having to monitor their children's 'online attendance' and ensure focus throughout the day, affecting their work and schedules.

Parents from B40 families revealed their struggle to provide sufficient resources for their children's education (e.g. gadgets, data plans), with some having to take out loans.

Several mothers also admitted feeling depressed or 'moody' as they struggled to balance work, home and family responsibilities.

INABILITY TO MEET FACE TO FACE AFFECTED RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING EFFORTS OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL COUNSELLORS.

Overall, school counsellors faced many cases of students struggling to cope with loss, especially when having lost their parents or immediate family members to COVID-19.

One of their chief complaints was not being able to conduct face-to-face sessions with students, which affected trust and relationship-building. The majority

of those interviewed pivoted to digital apps such as Whatsapp and Google Meet to engage with students.

Teachers, on the other hand, often felt frustrated at poor attendance for online classes. They also felt the pressure of having to teach effectively while learning to teach remotely at the same time. On a positive note, they reported receiving adequate emotional support from school management, parents and even the students themselves.

Several teachers also strategised creative ways to teach, including the use of games, physical movement activities and other learning strategies.



In general, findings suggested significant correlation between mental health, psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being of students. Amongst the participants of this study, the higher the level of mental health and psychological well-being, the higher the level of psychosocial well-being.

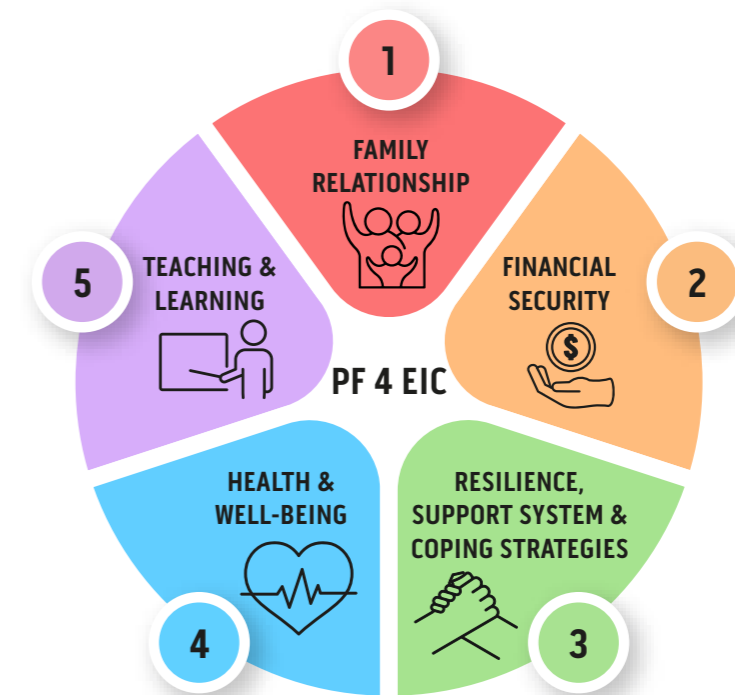
This study also identified the best predictors of students' psychosocial well-being:

- Age
- Gender
- School location
- Family socio-economic status (household monthly income)
- Ethnicity

Overall, Students were found to be positive about the future and highly motivated to move past the pandemic and regain a sense of normalcy. This may be attributed to efforts and interventions by government ministries and NGOs in mitigating the effects of COVID-19 and focusing on public health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 USING THE PF 4 EIC MODEL WILL PROPEL A COORDINATED EFFORT BY ALL STAKEHOLDERS TO MITIGATE AND PREVENT SCHOOL-RELATED MENTAL HEALTH RISKS



STAKEHOLDERS

- Schools and Educational Institutions
- Government and Local Agencies
- Healthcare
- Families and Communities

Based on this study's findings, a psychosocial framework has been developed. The Psychosocial Framework for Education in Crisis (PF 4 EIC), which considers Malaysia's 10-10 MySTIE Framework and six United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, seeks to mitigate future crises in the education system and is compatible for all circumstances.

PF 4 EIC covers the five components of psychosocial well-being for students, their families, school management and community stakeholders.

The framework seeks to: a) empower family relationships, b) strengthen and manage families' financial security, c) build students' resilience and create support systems between schools, families and communities to enhance students' coping strategies in education crises, d) improve students' health and well-being and e) create opportunities for students and enhance teachers' readiness in managing teaching and learning platforms in all circumstances.

Using PF 4 EIC, education systems can be better prepared for future crises through effective mental health campaigns focused on preventing school-related mental health risks, promoting awareness and building resilience amongst all stakeholders.

COMPONENT	MITIGATION / PROPOSED ACTION PLAN
Family Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify issues affecting families during crises. Raise crisis awareness amongst families. Provide needs-based support to affected families and equip them with relevant skills (e.g., communication skills, conflict resolution). Provide mental health screenings for family members and suggest professional help where necessary. Address non-supportive / non-conducive learning environments. Coordinated effort by: Education Ministry, Health Ministry, Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, religious leaders, village heads, NGOs and community-based societies
Financial Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify families who are financially affected by the crisis. Identify students whose learning has been affected by the crisis due to the lack of learning facilities or resources such as gadgets. Channel financial assistance to identified families in need. Coordinated effort by: Education Ministry, Health Ministry, Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, religious leaders, village heads and community leaders, NGOs, Zakat Institute, Welfare Department and community-based societies.
Resilience, Support System and Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Screen individuals who may be struggling with mental health issues. Educate the public on mental health in order to build resilience and healthy coping mechanisms. Create awareness on the need for solid support systems. Equip individuals to differentiate between healthy and harmful coping mechanisms.
Health & Well-being	<p>To support mental health, psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-management Self-care Self-regulation Coping and resilience Support System Healthy lifestyles and mindfulness
Teaching & Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and initiate a paradigm shift in teaching and learning pedagogy. Increase digital literacy. Support teachers in their increased/new roles and empower students to be more proactive learners. Prepare teachers and students for flexible teaching and learning during crises. Equip teachers and school administrators with assessment knowledge beyond the normal classroom setting. Equip teachers with creative learning strategies.



2 INTEGRATED POLICIES, PHONE SUPPORT LINES AND COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES CAN HELP TO MITIGATE CHALLENGES AND PROTECT MENTAL WELL-BEING OF YOUTH

STAKEHOLDERS

-  Schools and Educational Institutions
-  Government and Local Agencies
-  Healthcare
-  Families and Communities

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the younger generation requires support and focus as they are the future stakeholders of every nation. Priority must be given to stabilising and developing their well-being in the long term instead of just short-term economic and equity considerations.

In 2020, OECD proposed several mitigation measures to all governments, **including updating mental health information and implementing phone support lines**. Many countries also increased mental health funding and access to mental health services.

An **integrated whole-of-society response** was also strongly advised in delivering stronger, more integrated policies protecting and strengthening mental health.

This involves ensuring access to mental health services via in-person or telemedicine as well as finding alternatives to mental health promotion programmes in schools and workplaces. Employers must also contribute to supporting the mental health of employees, including those on job retention schemes as well as jobseekers.

Recommendations were also made by OECD for the **enhancement of youth well-being**, including:

- Applying a youth and intergenerational lens in crisis response and recovery measures across public administrations
- Updating national youth strategies in collaboration with youth stakeholders to translate political commitments into actionable programmes
- Partnering with national statistical offices and research institutes to gather disintegrated evidence on the impact of the crisis to identify gaps and inform decision-making
- Anticipating the effects of rulemaking and public resource allocation across different age cohorts

THE WAY FORWARD: PREPAREDNESS FOR FUTURE CRISES



When COVID-19 struck, the world was unprepared. Anxiety and depression rates increased, in some countries even doubling; the highest rates of mental distress correlated with intensifying COVID-19 mortalities and strict confinement measures; and mental health of unemployed individuals and those facing financial insecurity suffered the most (OECD, 2021).

This study's findings, although retrospective in nature as contingencies and mitigation plans were already well-established, revealed that for certain clusters of Malaysian students, their mental health, psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being were more affected than others. The report recommends building upon existing mitigation plans and provide critical support and training to educators, parents and students alike.

It is impossible to predict the characteristics or circumstances of future threats to the education system. However, education systems can be better prepared for crises by equipping all stakeholders involved in the academic experience with stronger mental readiness, relevant knowledge and practical tools to foster positive psychological well-being and psychosocial well-being amongst Malaysia's students.

References

List of References is available within the full research report, which is available upon email request at mle@hasanah.org.my.

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