EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG ACADEMICIANS IN MALAYSIA, INDONESIA, AND BRUNEI: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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Abstract*: Mental health issues among academicians have garnered increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of the demanding nature of academic work and the unique challenges faced by those in the profession. This conceptual paper aims to explore the mental health challenges confronting academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, three countries with rich cultural and educational landscapes. Drawing from existing literature and empirical evidence, the paper delves into the multifaceted factors that contribute to mental health concerns among academicians, including work-related stress, work-life balance, job insecurity, and the pressure to publish and secure funding. Additionally, the paper examines the sociocultural and institutional factors that may exacerbate or alleviate these challenges, such as societal attitudes towards mental health, workplace policies, and support systems. By synthesizing findings from diverse sources, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape for academicians in these countries, highlighting areas that require further investigation and intervention. Ultimately, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on mental health in academia and inform efforts to promote well-being and support structures for academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.*

Keywords*: Mental health, academicians, work stress, well-being, higher education*
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Introduction

A person's mental state can be in perfect condition or seriously compromised. A state of excellent mental health is defined not only by the absence of mental illness but also by the development of adaptive thought and behaviour patterns that facilitate successful interaction with one's environment. A person's mental health is the cornerstone of their emotions, reasoning, communication, learning, robustness, and sense of self (The American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Relationships, emotional and personal well-being, and the capacity to positively influence society are all impacted by an individual's mental health. Being in good mental health makes it possible for people to operate well in daily life, which promotes constructive pursuits (caregiving, work, and education), strong social bonds, and the ability to adapt to change and overcome hardship. Workers' mental health, which plays a major role in defining their general health, has a substantial impact on their productivity and quality of life (Sutarto, 2021). Healthy companies are essential to healthy societies because they allow employees to actively contribute to the organization's success while also safeguarding their mental health. This motivates people to live healthier, more active, and resilient lives (Tisu et al., 2020).

However, an increasing proportion of people experience mental health issues at work. The academic field is known for its demanding nature, where the pressure to excel in research, teaching and administrative responsibilities has resulted in a growing concern for the well-being of educators Kinman & Wray 2018). Academics often grapple with stress levels, anxiety and burnout impacting both their professional lives negatively (Watts & Robertson 2011). The mental health issues faced by educators have garnered attention recently due to repercussions such as decreased productivity, job dissatisfaction and overall poor well-being (Shin & Jung 2014). In Southeast Asia countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei have seen an expansion of their education sectors. This growth has placed increased demands on educators in these regions (Mukminin et al., 2019).

However there remains a gap in studies that delve into the health challenges specifically encountered by educators in these nations. This research project aims to address this gap through an examination of the health obstacles encountered by educators, in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. The objectives of this study are to determine the prevalence of mental health issues among academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, to identify the factors contributing to mental health challenges faced by academicians in these countries and to compare the mental health challenges experienced by academicians across the three countries. This study holds significance by addressing mental health challenges among academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, an often-overlooked issue. By promoting awareness and identifying contributing factors, it aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Fostering a supportive academic environment can enhance the well-being of educators, ultimately improving the quality of higher education. Cross-country insights may inform region-specific strategies, contributing to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Prioritizing academicians' mental health is crucial for sustainable development, as a healthy academic workforce can drive innovation, research, and capacity-building towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Literature Review

Mental Health Challenges Faced by Academicians

Mental health struggles are very common among academicians worldwide. Demanding academic work often leads to exposure to high levels of stress and burnout, leading to emotional exhaustion and decreased productivity Alarmingly, a study by AlHija (2022) found that university more than 60% of teachers in the Middle East report moderate to high burnout It can also contribute to depression and anxiety disorders in the middle (Holihan et al., 2019; Shin & Jung, 2014). A recent study by Lee et al. (2023) found that about 30% of teachers in China experienced symptoms of depression. In addition, the daily routine and stress associated with academic work can cause sleep disturbances, which can further exacerbate mental health issues (Watts & Robertson, 2011). The study by Barker et al. (2020) found that poor sleep quality was significantly associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety among university employees. These mental health challenges, including stress, burnout, depression, anxiety and sleep problems, can have serious consequences for the well-being and performance of teachers worldwide, highlighting the need for intervention and emphasis is placed on effective programs in academic institutions.

Numerous research has been carried out to determine the elements that affect mental health. There are several elements in the workplace that are known to influence employees' mental health. Previous studies have shown that a number of work-related factors, such as high job demands, low job control, a high effort-reward imbalance, low relational justice, low procedural justice, role stress, bullying, and a lack of social support at work, have contributed to the development of stress, anxiety, and depression. High job demand, low job control, low workplace social support, effort-reward imbalance, low organizational procedural justice, low organizational relational justice, organizational change, job insecurity, temporary employment status, a typical workday, bullying, and role stress are all factors that have been found to have an impact on employees' mental health, according to Gray et al. (2019).

The academic environment itself presents numerous challenges that can contribute to mental health issues among academicians. One significant factor is the overwhelming workload and work overload, as academicians often face heavy teaching loads, research obligations, administrative duties, and service commitments, leading to excessive demands on their time and energy (Kinman & Wray, 2018; Shin & Jung, 2014). Additionally, the prevalence of short-term contracts, the pressure to secure tenure or promotion, and the competitive nature of academia can contribute to job insecurity and career uncertainty, which can negatively impact mental well-being (Jiang et al., 2020; Shin & Jung, 2014). Furthermore, the demanding nature of academic work can make it challenging to maintain a healthy work-life balance, leading to conflicts between personal and professional responsibilities (Winefield et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2021). Lack of organizational support, including insufficient institutional support, inadequate resources, and unsupportive leadership or organizational culture, can exacerbate mental health challenges among academicians (Novitasari et al., 2020; Pignata et al., 2021). Moreover, the intense pressure to publish research in high-impact journals, secure grants, and maintain a strong publication record, often referred to as the "publish or perish" culture, can create significant stress and anxiety (Shin & Jung, 2014; Zou et al., 2020).

A study conducted in the United Kingdom revealed high levels of stress and psychological distress among university staff, with work-life balance and organizational culture being significant predictors (Kinman & Jones, 2008). In the United States, a survey of faculty

members found that a significant proportion experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Holihan et al., 2019). Similarly, research in Australia highlighted the impact of job demands and organizational factors on the mental well-being of academicians (Winefield et al., 2008). Academicians were the most likely to express concerns about work-related stress, accounting for almost 21.7% of workers in Malaysia's higher education institutions (Yusof et al. 2022). Employees in higher education have also spoken about their experiences with depression and anxiety. Because of their roles as researchers and lecturers, which allow them to engage directly with students and gain recognition outside of the classroom, academicians seem to be the cornerstone of universities (Cankir, 2017). Both McMaster (2021) and Smith (2022) stress the value of offering faculty members mental health education and support, with Smith (2022) emphasizing the relevance of social interactions, personal experiences, stigma, and environmental factors.

In the Southeast Asian context, studies on mental health challenges among academicians are limited. However, some research has been conducted in individual countries. For example, a study in Malaysia found that academicians experienced high levels of stress due to factors such as workload, work-life imbalance, and job insecurity (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010). Another study in Indonesia highlighted the impact of organizational culture and leadership on the well-being of academicians (Novitasari et al., 2020). In Malaysia, studies have highlighted the high levels of stress and burnout experienced by academicians. A survey conducted by Ismail et al. (2022) revealed that a significant proportion of Malaysian academicians reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. The study identified factors such as work overload, role conflict, and job insecurity as major contributors to these mental health issues. Similarly, Lim et al. (2020) found that poor work-life balance and lack of organizational support were associated with higher levels of stress and burnout among Malaysian academicians.

Mental Health Challenges Among Academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei

Several studies have explored the mental health challenges faced by academicians in Malaysia. A nationwide study by Ismail et al. (2022) investigated mental health issues among academicians in Malaysian public universities. Using a quantitative survey approach, the study found that a significant proportion of academicians reported symptoms of anxiety (38%), depression (29%), and emotional exhaustion (44%). Factors such as work overload, role conflict, and job insecurity were identified as major contributors to these mental health issues. Lim et al. (2020) conducted a study examining work-life balance and job satisfaction among Malaysian academics. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that poor work-life balance and lack of organizational support were associated with higher levels of stress and burnout. Additionally, the qualitative data highlighted the challenges of managing competing demands and the negative impact on personal well-being.

Another study by Mukundan and Khandehroo (2010) focused specifically on burnout among English language teachers in Malaysia. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the study found that a significant proportion of English language teachers experienced moderate to high levels of burnout. The researchers identified factors such as heavy workload, lack of career advancement opportunities, and poor working conditions as contributing factors. Despite the valuable insights gained from existing studies, there are several gaps and limitations that warrant further investigation. Notably, there has been a limited focus on specific subgroups or

disciplines within the academic community in Malaysia, potentially overlooking unique challenges faced by certain groups (Ismail et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2020; Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010). Additionally, the lack of longitudinal studies makes it difficult to track changes in mental health over time among Malaysian academicians, hindering the ability to identify potential trends or patterns. Furthermore, limited exploration of coping strategies and interventions specifically tailored to support the mental health of Malaysian academicians has left a significant gap in understanding effective ways to address these challenges. Lastly, the absence of cross-cultural or comparative studies with other Southeast Asian countries limits the understanding of how mental health challenges among academicians in Malaysia may differ or converge with those faced by their counterparts in neighbouring regions.

In Indonesia, research has focused on the impact of organizational culture and leadership on the well-being of academicians. Novitasari et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of a supportive organizational culture in promoting the mental health and well-being of university lecturers. Their study showed that a positive organizational culture characterized by trust, open communication, and respect for individual differences could serve as a protective factor against mental health challenges. Additionally, Muhaimin et al. (2021) explored the role of academic. Research on mental health challenges among academicians in Indonesia has primarily focused on the impact of organizational culture, leadership, and academic stress. Novitasari et al. (2020) explored the role of organizational culture in promoting the well-being of university lecturers in Indonesia. Through a qualitative study involving focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, they found that a supportive organizational culture characterized by trust, open communication, and respect for individual differences could serve as a protective factor against mental health challenges. Muhaimin et al. (2021) investigated academic stress and coping strategies among Muslim students in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions. Their study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The findings revealed that academic stress was prevalent among students and was associated with factors such as workload, financial constraints, and sociocultural challenges. Additionally, the study identified various coping strategies employed by students, including religious practices and social support. Another study by Riyanti and Rahaju (2023) explored the impact of work-life balance on the well-being of lecturers at a private university in Indonesia. Using a quantitative survey method, the study found a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and subjective well-being. Lecturers who reported better work-life balance experienced higher levels of life satisfaction and overall well-being.
One of the few studies conducted in Brunei was by Zaman et al. (2023), which explored the prevalence of burnout and its associated factors among academic staff at a public university. Using a quantitative survey approach, the study found that a significant proportion of academicians experienced moderate to high levels of burnout, with workload and work-life imbalance being significant predictors. The researchers highlighted the need for interventions and support systems to address mental health issues among academicians in Brunei. Another study by Daud et al. (2021) investigated the impact of organizational culture on job satisfaction and mental well-being among academicians at a private university in Brunei. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The findings suggested that a supportive organizational culture, characterized by open communication and trust, positively influenced job satisfaction and mental well-being among academicians.

Despite these efforts, there is a lack of comprehensive comparative studies examining the mental health challenges faced by academicians across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. This

research aims to fill this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the mental health challenges experienced by academicians in these three countries, considering the unique cultural and institutional contexts. While these studies provide valuable insights, there is a lack of comparative research examining the mental health challenges faced by academicians across different Southeast Asian countries. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the mental health challenges experienced by academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.

Work Overload and Academician's Mental Health

Excessive workload has significant negative effects on academicians, professors, and teachers, particularly on their mental health and job performance. Lu et al. (2021) found that high-intensity workload among academicians leads to psychological distress, reducing their efficiency and negatively impacting students. Similarly, Ohadomere and Ogamba (2021) highlighted that excessive workload contributes to decreased job satisfaction and work performance, as educators experience exhaustion and a lack of motivation. Furthermore, Hammoudi et al. (2023) emphasized that work overload disrupts work-life balance, creating conflicts between professional and personal responsibilities, which further elevates stress levels. The physical health of educators is also at risk, as Lee et al. (2022) reported that heavy workloads can cause fatigue, headaches, and even chronic conditions like hypertension due to prolonged stress exposure.

Beyond personal well-being, workload-related stress also affects job retention and teaching quality. Pace et al. (2021) found that excessive job demands increase turnover intentions, with many educators considering leaving their positions due to the overwhelming pressure. This instability threatens the long-term sustainability of academic institutions. Additionally, Lu et al. (2021) noted that when educators are burdened with excessive administrative tasks and research expectations, their teaching effectiveness declines, leading to reduced student engagement and poorer learning outcomes. The cumulative impact of workload stress not only affects individual educators but also compromises the overall quality of education.

Role Conflict and Academician's Mental Health

Role conflict has significant implications for academicians, affecting both their psychological well-being and professional effectiveness. According to Zhou et al. (2021), conflicting job roles create stress and emotional exhaustion, particularly when individuals are required to fulfil incompatible responsibilities simultaneously. This strain is exacerbated when job expectations are unclear or contradictory, leading to increased anxiety and reduced job satisfaction (Priyanka et al., 2024). Moreover, Naidoo-Chetty and Du Plessis, (2021) found that role conflict disrupts work-life balance, as academicians struggle to meet both institutional demands and personal obligations, often resulting in heightened work-related stress and diminished overall well-being. Over time, these pressures contribute to burnout, negatively impacting motivation and professional engagement (Keshmiri, 2024).

Beyond personal well-being, role conflict also undermines institutional productivity and teaching effectiveness. Priyanka et al. (2024) highlighted that when academicians are overwhelmed by conflicting demands, their ability to focus on research and teaching declines, ultimately affecting student outcomes. Furthermore, Munusamy et al. (2024) emphasized that prolonged exposure to role conflict leads to disengagement and higher turnover intentions, as educators seek less stressful career alternatives. This creates instability within academic institutions and affects knowledge continuity. Overall, the persistent challenge of role conflict

necessitates proactive institutional policies to mitigate its negative consequences and promote a healthier work environment for academicians.

Job Insecurity and Academician's Mental Health

Job insecurity has been widely recognized as a significant stressor that negatively impacts employees' psychological well-being and job attitudes. Research indicates that heightened job insecurity leads to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, ultimately affecting overall mental health (Baluku et al., 2024). Employees experiencing job uncertainty often exhibit lower job satisfaction and engagement, as the fear of potential job loss diminishes their commitment to organizational goals (Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021). Moreover, prolonged job insecurity can contribute to burnout and emotional exhaustion, further reducing employees' ability to perform effectively in their roles (Hellgren et al., 1999). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these effects, particularly in sectors such as education, where teachers faced employment instability due to prolonged school closures and financial constraints (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2023).

Beyond psychological distress, job insecurity also leads to detrimental behavioral and organizational outcomes. Employees who perceive their jobs as unstable are more likely to develop withdrawal behaviors, such as reduced organizational commitment and increased turnover intentions (Mauno et al., 2021). This instability affects workplace morale and productivity, as employees may disengage from their responsibilities due to uncertainty about their future employment status (Sora et al., 2010). Additionally, job insecurity influences workplace relationships, fostering distrust and diminishing teamwork, which can hinder organizational performance in the long run (Probst, 2002). However, some studies suggest that organizational compassion and supportive leadership can mitigate the negative effects of job insecurity, highlighting the importance of managerial interventions in fostering a resilient workforce (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Work-life Imbalance and Academician's Mental Health

Xiaomei (2023) revealed that poor work-life balance is a major contributor to anxiety and depression among faculty members and argue that promoting a healthy balance is necessary to enhance mental resilience and prevent job dissatisfaction. Moreover, academicians who experience a positive work-life balance tend to be more innovative and produce higher-quality research (Munusamy et al., 2024). On the other hand, those facing constant work-related stress often experience reduced motivation and diminished research engagement. A study by Sakarji et al. (2024) mentioned that female academicians often struggle with balancing professional responsibilities and personal obligations, particularly caregiving roles.

Moreover, Wei and Ye (2022) found that excessive work demands, including teaching, research, and administrative duties, contribute to high stress levels, leading to burnout, while asserted that work-life balance is crucial for sustaining academic motivation and overall job performance, while institutions with rigid work structures and high expectations for continuous output struggle with academician turnover (Boamah et al., 2022). Additionally, when faculty members experience work overload, their teaching quality and student engagement suffer. Conversely, those with manageable workloads and a balanced lifestyle tend to demonstrate higher teaching enthusiasm and effectiveness (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024). Quinn and Hartland-Grant (2024) explores the coping mechanisms used by academicians to manage work-life balance challenges and discovered that some strategies such as time management, delegation

of responsibilities, and personal boundary-setting as key factors in maintaining their work-life balance.

### Digital/Techno Stress and Academician's Mental Health

Yang et al (2025) reveal a notable increase in research on aacademician's technostress since 2018, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a predominant focus on studies from Asia and a significant absence of perspectives from North America. Common identified sources of technostress include technological factors, workplace conditions, and personal perceptions. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that technostress affects academicians s' well-being and overall job performance. Moore (2023) also highlighted that academician experienced significant technostress due to factors such as techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, and techno-insecurity. These stressors negatively impacted work performance and contributed to work-related burnout. Additionally, a study by Antón-Sancho et al. (2025) discussed how excessive technology use in online learning increases psychological strain on academicians. The shift to digital learning environments resulted in higher workload and role conflict, leading to emotional exhaustion. Many academicians struggled with techno-overload due to an excessive number of digital tools and techno-complexity from the difficulty of learning new systems, thus reduced teaching satisfaction and engagement. Additionally, the anxiety and stress among academicians are heightened due to frequent system updates, cybersecurity concerns, and the constant evolution of digital platforms. A significant issue was techno-insecurity, where academicians feared losing their jobs due to technological advancements. Additionally, the blurred boundaries between work and personal life in online teaching settings contributed to work-life imbalance, increased mental fatigue, and ultimately, higher burnout rates (Manning et al., 2020).

Fernández-Arias et al. (2024) explores the psychological effects of rapid digitalization in academia. It was found that academicians felt immense pressure to quickly adapt to new digital tools, which led to increased screen time, higher stress levels, and sleep disturbances. The lack of institutional training further exacerbated their frustration, leaving many feelings incompetent. Antón-Sancho et al. (2023) found a strong correlation between technostress and job dissatisfaction among academicians. Techno-overload and techno-invasion made staff feel overwhelmed, reducing their overall job satisfaction. Similarly, Sevic et al. (2025), emphasized the challenges academicians faced when adapting to rapidly changing educational technology. Many of the academicians experienced significant stress, particularly older academicians who resisted technology adoption due to a lack of familiarity. The increased administrative burden from digital reporting requirements further contributed to their stress levels. As a result, many academicians reported reduced motivation and engagement in teaching.

The hypothesized model of academicians' mental health is shown in Figure 1 and the hypotheses developed show the relationships between work overload, role conflict, job insecurity, work-life imbalance, digital/techno stress and academicians' mental health are as follow:

H1: Work overload has a negative and significant influence on academicians' mental health.
H2: Role conflict has a negative and significant influence on academicians' mental health.
H3: Job insecurity has a negative and significant influence on academicians' mental health.
H4: Work-life imbalance has a negative and significant influence on academicians' mental health.
H5: Digital/Techno stress has a negative and significant influence on academicians' mental health.
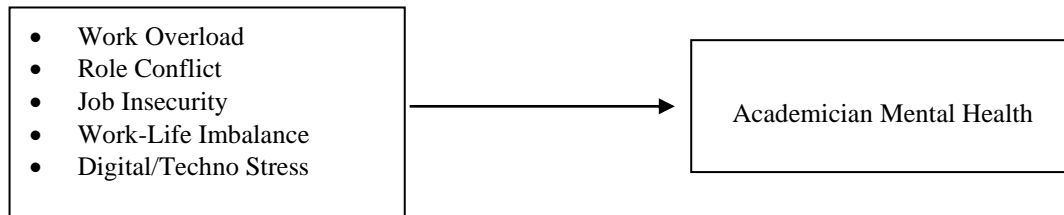
Figure 1: The Hypothesized Model of Academician's Mental Health

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this conceptual study highlight the significant mental health challenges faced by academicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Across the three countries, there is a consistent pattern of high levels of mental health among academicians. These mental health issues can be attributed to various factors, including work overload, role conflicts, job insecurity, work-life imbalance, and digital/techno stress. The demanding nature of academic work exacerbates these challenges. While some studies have explored coping strategies and interventions, there is a need for more comprehensive and tailored approaches to address the unique stressors and mental health needs of academicians in these Southeast Asian nations.

Mental health is a critical issue that warrants attention within the academic community of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. The findings from this conceptual study underscore the need for institutional reforms, supportive policies, and comprehensive interventions to promote the well-being of academicians. By addressing the root causes of mental health challenges, such as work overload, role conflicts, job insecurity, work-life imbalance, and digital/techno stress, academic institutions can create a more sustainable and supportive environment for academicians. Additionally, fostering a culture of open dialogue, destigmatizing mental health concerns, and providing accessible resources and support services can empower academicians to prioritize their mental well-being. Ultimately, investing in the mental health of academicians is not only a ethical imperative but also a strategic investment in the long-term success and excellence of higher education institutions in these countries.

Acknowledgement

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