FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES, SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONG NEW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

University education is viewed as an honourable level of education as it enables personal development in different areas of expertise through scientific exposure. Over the last few years, there has been a significant increase on the issues of rising cost of education, as well as students' emotional fragility within the higher education sector which may link to many negative outcomes. This article aims to examine the influence of financial difficulties and sociodemographic characteristics on new university students' self-esteem using t-test and ANOVA analysis on 411 respondents. Results showed that a student's programme is the only factor that significantly influences a new student's self-esteem. In light of these surprising findings, this study discussed the implication and strategies, particularly in maintaining students' self-esteem during their study term.

Keywords:

Financial Difficulties, New Students, Self-Esteem, Sociodemographic, University

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher instruction, the pursuit of knowledge and individual development is both a signal of aspiration and a door to future opportunities. For many people, the journey through university promises intellectual enlightenment, skill acquisition, and the fulfilment of long-held dreams. However, intertwined with these prospects are practical realities that can shape and sometimes challenge the course of this scientific adventure. Among these challenges, financial constraints, socio-demographic backgrounds, and self-esteem have emerged as issues to be explored, shedding light on the intricate dynamics that influence students' holistic experiences. For fresh-faced students, stepping into the halls of academia is a mixture of excitement and anxiety. The pursuit of academic excellence comes with many challenges that can be overshadowed by financial constraints. These restrictions can translate into tuition fees, textbook costs, and overall cost of living, creating an environment where students must navigate a delicate balance between academic aspirations and economic realities. At the same time, socio-demographic context, including factors such as gender, field of study, targeted academic achievement, and family income, contributes to the unique tapestry that shapes individuals' perceptions of their place in the academic community.

The intersection of economic difficulties and sociodemographic backgrounds poses multifaceted challenges that can affect students' self-esteem, a fundamental aspect of their mental health and personal development. Extensive research supports the idea that financial hardship can affect many aspects of student life, including mental health and academic performance (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023). Additionally, studies have shown that financial stress can increase anxiety levels and lower self-esteem among university students (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Lange & Byrd, 1998). Studies also demonstrated the influence of sociodemographic factors on students' self-esteem (El-sheikh et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2022). These sociodemographic factors include gender, academic discipline, academic achievement, and family income. However, the problem of these previous studies is the scope limitation. Some studies have focused only on the specific socio demographic factors or specific aspects of financial distress, limiting the understanding of a broader picture (Khoo & Farah, 2021). In addition, cultural and regional differences are also the challenges identified in the past studies. Most studies are conducted in specific regions or countries (Kamis et al., 2021). Hence, there is a need for more research conducted in South East Asia countries in understanding the impact of financial difficulties and sociodemographic factors to students' self-esteem.

While some students have relatively easy access to college financially, others face significant financial obstacles that affect their mental health and self-perception beyond the classroom. This study examines deeper into the effects of freshmen financial difficulties and sociodemographic background on their self-esteem. By addressing the question of how these variables shape students' experiences, we contribute to a richer understanding of the complex factors that influence student well-being and academic success.

This study contributes to a growing body of literature dealing with the overall well-being of new university students by testing the influence of financial difficulties and sociodemographic characteristics on their self-esteem. In the next section of this article, we will draw on existing

research and empirical evidence to examine these relationships and explore their potential impact on student development and success. Ultimately, this study discusses the implications and strategies for maintaining students' self-esteem during their study term. In essence, this study aims to shed light on how financial constraints and socio-demographic factors affect the self-esteem of freshman university students and, in turn, provide insights that can inform strategies to support and maintain students' self-esteem during their university journey.

Literature Review

Self-esteem is an important psychological construct that affects an individual's overall mental health and well-being. Silber and Tippett (1965) define self-esteem as individuals' sense of satisfaction with themselves, and it reflects the relationship between their ideal self-image and personal self-image. On the other hand, Rosenberg (1965) describes self-esteem as an individual's sense of worth and value according to their self-evaluations. In this study, self-esteem is defined as a positive or negative perception of a student's self-worth, which may affect their motivation and ability to achieve their goals in university. This literature review examines the relationship between self-esteem and several factors, including financial difficulties, gender, academic program, academic achievement, and family income among new university students.

Self-Esteem and Financial Difficulties

Financial anxiety among university students has been the focus of researchers (Heckman et al., 2014), as the majority of university students face financial difficulties that usually lead to financial anxiety and stress. One of the contributing factors to this issue is that students are dealing with high tuition rates, inflation, debt, and unreliable job prospects (Worthy et al., 2010). Several studies discovered that financial anxiety among students can be linked to poor academic performance, poor mental and physical health, and poor social adjustment (Bennett et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2010). Heckman et al. (2014) support that financial anxiety is common among university students, in which it was found that more than 71% of them experience stress from personal financial difficulties.

A report by the American College Health Association (2013) reveals that financial issues are one of the main causes of stress among undergraduates in university, as 35% of them are experiencing financial anxiety. It is also found that students' characteristics have shown a notable association with financial anxiety. Reiss (2013) concurs that based on the accumulated evidence from previous research, socioeconomically disadvantaged students are three times more likely to develop mental health issues compared to their peers.

Past studies have shown financial difficulties are prevalent among university students and have been linked to stress and anxiety. It is important to explore how financial difficulties may affect students' self-esteem and, subsequently, their overall well-being. Hence, it is posited that:

H1: There is a difference in the perception of self-esteem between new students with and without financial difficulties.

Self-Esteem and Gender

Gender plays an important role in shaping a person's self-esteem. Recognising the impact of gender on self-esteem will influence mental health interventions, education, and policies to promote positive self-perception and well-being. Researchers have given considerable

attention to the relationship between gender and self-esteem due to its potential effects on individual happiness and social motivation. It has been suggested that gender, as a multifaceted concept encompassing social, psychological, and biological aspects, affects the development and expression of self-esteem in various ways (Mazzuca et al., 2020; Mohamad et al., 2020; Ramli et al., 2023).

Several studies have explored the presence of gender differences in self-esteem. Research by Casale et al. (2020) shows a small but consistent difference in self-esteem between the sexes, with men tending to report slightly higher levels of self-esteem than women. This difference may, in part, be because social norms and gender role expectations may encourage men to value traits related to confidence and achievement, while women may have to face greater pressure to conform to appearance-based standards (Kling et al., 1999). However, these differences are not universal and may vary depending on cultural background and personal experience. Since gender can play a crucial role in shaping an individual's perception of self-esteem, it is predicted that:

H2: There is a difference in the perception of self-esteem between male and female new students.

Self-Esteem and Academic Programme
Research shows that one of the factors that can affect an individual's self-esteem is the individual's choice of academic programme or field of study. A study by Harackiewicz et al. (2016) shows that students who majored in their interests and strengths had higher self-esteem than students who worked in less relevant fields. Individuals' interest in their chosen academic discipline was found to be predictive of academic success and, therefore, possess higher self-esteem (Neroni et al., 2022). Fields that align with an individual's strengths and interests may lead to higher academic performance and, subsequently, higher self-esteem.

Studies show that Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students face unique challenges that affect their self-esteem. For example, a study by Froehlich et al. (2022) found that female STEM students encountered gender stereotypes, leading them to have a lack of positive emotions, higher anxiety, and lack of motivation. This suggests that challenges faced by students related to specific academic programmes can affect their self-esteem. However, students in the Arts and Humanities fields may experience different factors that affect their self-esteem. People who engage in Arts and Humanities face uncertainty and subjective evaluations of their work. According to Tesser (2001), uncertainty appears to be related to low self-esteem. This suggests that uncertainty evaluation of assignments in the academic programme appears to influence students' self-esteem.

The choice of academic programme or field of study can significantly affect an individual's self-esteem. Understanding the relationship between academic programmes and self-esteem can have implications on educational institutions and interventions aimed at improving students' self-esteem. Therefore, it is posited that:

H3: There is a difference in the new student's self-esteem according to their academic programmes.

Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Academic achievement exhibits the outcome of performance, which indicates students' accomplishment of their goals, specifically in learning institutions (Crede et al., 2015). Currently, in most tertiary institutions, the grade point average (GPA) system is used to measure students' academic performance. This measurement system is considered suitable since it provides further insight into the relative level of performance of individuals and groups of students (Khosrow-pour, 2008).

It has been discovered that children tend to show greater resilience to adverse experiences, such as financial difficulty, when their self-esteem is high, and it is also found that self-esteem can subside the side effects of stress and quality of life (Buckner et al., 2003; Young, 2001). According to Marjanovic et al. (2015), self-esteem may also be influenced by people's perception of the extent of the threat to their financial situation. A quantitative study of 243 university students was conducted by Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) to examine the effects of motivation and self-esteem on students' academic involvement, which was reflected in their academic performance. The respondents consisted of science and social science students in a public university. The study discovered that self-esteem does affect students' behavioural and emotional disengagement.

It has also been established that self-esteem plays a crucial role in students' academic achievement, whereby academic achievement improves greatly when self-esteem is increased (Jirdehi et al., 2018). High self-esteem is not the sole contributing factor to academic achievement and success, but it does aid in facilitating perseverance after failing. Thus, early intervention for students who are demonstrating signs of low self-esteem is crucial, as one of the most essential measures to raising students' self-esteem is through coping strategies (Alghamdi et al., 2023). Since academic achievement and self-esteem are interconnected, self-esteem can influence students' academic performance and their ability to cope with challenges. Therefore, it is anticipated that:

H4: There is a difference in the new student's self-esteem according to their academic achievement targeted group.

Self-Esteem and Family Income

Family income and socioeconomic status have been linked to an individual's self-esteem. Investigating this relationship is crucial to understand the impact of socioeconomic factors on self-esteem among new university students. Cheng et al. (2015) claim that young adults from families with low socioeconomic backgrounds are at greater risk of social anxiety, and self-esteem plays an important mediating role in the process. This is because various studies have proven that socioeconomic status and self-esteem are interrelated. Additionally, studies have discovered that students' self-esteem can be linked to parental social class, as measured by parental education and household income (James & Amato, 2013).

Twenge and Campbell (2002) found that individuals with higher socioeconomic status are inclined to have higher self-esteem, especially during their young adulthood stage. Additionally, a study that examined the predictors of financial anxiety among university students discovered that students who are from families with a difficult financial situation experience greater anxiety compared to their peers without financial difficulties (Potter at al., 2020). On the contrary, various research also discovered that students' family socioeconomic

status has a negative correlation with their social anxiety (Cheng et al., 2015; Demir et al., 2013; Schneier et al., 1992). Based on this argument, the fifth hypothesis is generated:

H5: There is a difference in the new student's self-esteem according to their family income group.

Methodology

Sample Characteristics and Procedure

A total of 411 new students from UiTM Pahang participated in the study. Rationally, students from different faculties were involved. In particular, the samples are different in terms of educational level which involved diploma and degree students and widely spread across nine (9) faculties in the university. Surveys were collected during the second to third week of academic week and they were encouraged to take the survey on a voluntary basis.

Descriptions of Instrument

This survey comprised of 2 sections – Section A – Demographic Factor that captured information such as gender, academic program, family income and CGPA targeted. The second section presented on a Likert-scale to measure Self-Esteem adapted from Rosenberg (1979). Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale was applied based on its uncomplicated language, its conciseness (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) as well as it is considered as the most widely used measure (Byrne, 1996). A five-point Likert-scale ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree) was used to ensure that new students can express the degree of their opinion. In this study, even no opinion at all at the scale "3" is taken into consideration due to the factor of the respondents which are new university students who do not know what to answer. There are about 10 items in describing the "Self-Esteem" factor. Together with these scaling questions, students were asked to position themselves at the best reflection of their recent situation which relates to the financial difficulties that they are encountering through a "Yes" or "No" question. Based on Sekaran & Bougie (2010), the sample size is sufficient to conduct the analysis. In this study, ANOVA and t-test are applied to examine the proposed hypotheses. The SPSS 28.0 is used to run the analysis.

Reliability of the Constructs

The reliability of the constructs can be assessed using Cronbach's α. A value of 0.70 is considered satisfactory for most studies (Nunnally, 1978). The reliability of ten items in this study is found to be more than the threshold which shows good reliability (Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability analysis

Constructs	Items	Cronbach's α
Self-Esteem	10	0.919

Findings

This section deliberates on the results of the empirical testing of the data gathered. The first part will discuss the participant's demographic profile and will be followed by the discussion on the test conducted with regards to the t-tests.

Participants

The final survey data includes a total of 411 responses, of which 69.6% are from female students and only 30.4% male. Most participants (52.3%) were from the B40 family income background. However, only 22.1% perceived that they were facing financial difficulties. Furthermore, the details of respondents' demographic background are shown in Table 2 which includes gender, family financial background, and programs from both science and technology, and social sciences faculties.

Table 2. Demographic Attributes of the Sample

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Program		
Diploma in Accounting (AC110)	49	11.9
Diploma in Wood Industry (AS117)	13	3.2
Diploma in Planting Industry Management (AT110)	18	4.4
Diploma in Office Management and Technology (BA132)	52	12.7
Bachelor in Office Systems Management (Hons) (BA232)	10	2.4
Diploma in Civil Engineering (CE110)	21	5.1
Diploma in Sport Studies (SR113)	7	1.7
Diploma in Public Administration (AM110)	73	17.8
Diploma in Business Studies (BA111)	58	14.1
Diploma in Banking Studies (BA119)	57	13.9
Diploma in Computer Science (CS110)	37	9.0
Diploma in Statistics (CS111)	16	3.9
Gender		
Male	125	30.4
Female	286	69.6
Family Income		
B40	215	52.3
M40	142	34.5
T20	54	13.1
Financial Difficulties		
Yes	91	22.1
No	320	77.9

Test of Financial Difficulties and Gender Effect on Student's Self-Esteem

Table 3 depicts the mean and standard deviation for all self-esteem items. Overall, research results reveal that students agree with all the positive statements of their self-esteem. Sense of self-esteem (ie., I always feel that my life is very meaningful; I always value myself) was considered as high across all students (M=3.76, SD=0.88). However, 1 item (SE 4 in Table 3)

reported low self-esteem (M=3.29, SD=0.95) which students perceived that they are not really sure whether they have many things to be proud of.

The t-test results for the constructs are shown in Table 4 based on the hypothesis. There were no significant differences found at the p<0.05 between 1) financial difficulties (p=0.549) and 2) gender (p=0.793) with the student's self-esteem perceived.

It is shown that there is no significant difference in self-esteem rate among students with or without financial difficulties – "Yes" (Mean= 3.678, SD=0.7087) and "No" (Mean=3.74, SD=0.6685). Based on the results, it is shown that students who are not having financial difficulties perceive slightly higher self-esteem mean value; however, the difference in these mean values is not considered significant at 0.05 level of confidence. Therefore, the results direct to the conclusion that there is no significant difference in self-esteem among students who are with or without financial difficulties (Not support for H1).

Table 3. Means and Std. Deviation For Self-Esteem Items

No	Self-esteem	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
SE 1	At times I think that I am fine.	411	3.79	0.83
SE 2	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	411	3.66	0.82
SE 3	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	411	3.62	0.87
SE 4	I feel that I have many things to be proud of.	411	3.29	0.95
SE 5	I always feel that my life is very meaningful.	411	3.88	0.89
SE 6	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	411	3.77	0.95
SE 7	I always value myself.	411	4.10	0.89
SE 8	I tend to feel that I am a successful person.	411	3.73	0.88
SE 9	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	411	4.02	0.85
SE 10	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	411	3.68	0.96

Furthermore, results indicated that male students perceived higher in their self-esteem mean value compared to the female students but it is not considered significant at 0.05 level of confidence – "Male" (Mean= 3.843, SD=0.678) and "Female" (Mean=3.713, SD=0.675). Thus, H2 is not supported.

Table 4. T-test Results

Constructs	Financial Difficulties (Hypothesis 1)		Sig (2-tailed)
	Yes	No	
	3.68	3.77	0.549
Self-esteem	Gender (Hypothesis 2)		
	Male	Female	
	3.84	3.71	0.793

Test of Programs, Academic Achievement Targeted and Family Income Group Effect on Student's Self-Esteem

The hypothesis testing for H3, H4 and H5 were conducted by using ANOVA. Based on the results in Table 5, only H3 indicated significant differences in the mean difference of student's

self-esteem. ANOVA of self-esteem perceived by the programs show that there is a difference in the student's self-esteem according to their programs (p=0.027). 2 programs that score high for mean score (more than 4.00) are AT110 (Mean=4.19) and BA119 (Mean=4.04). Programs that scored the lowest (Mean=3.64) are AC110 and SR113.

Taking the academic achievement (H4) and family income group (H5) as variables for applying ANOVA, it was found that academic achievement targeted (p=0.296) and student's family income group (p=0.388) do not influence the perception of their self-esteem. Hence, H4 and H5 are not supported.

Table 5. ANOVA Results

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Programs (Hypothesis 3)					
Between Groups	9.873	11	0.898	2.007	0.027
Within Groups	178.472	399	0.447		
Academic Achievement (Hypothesis 4)					
Between Groups	1.120	2	0560	1.220	0.296
Within Groups	187.225	408	0.459		
Family Income Group (Hypothesis 5)					
Between Groups	0.873	2	0.437	0.950	0.388
Within Groups	187.472	408	0.459		

Discussion

In this study, there are five research hypotheses that have been outlined. This study aims to investigate the relationship between students' self-esteem and five identified factors, including financial status, gender, academic programme, academic achievement, and family income group. The rationale for selecting these five factors in relation to students' self-esteem is because they are among the contributing elements to the state of students' self-esteem, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors are considered crucial to this study since they are common environmental factors that may influence changes in students' self-esteem, especially during and in the post-COVID-19 era.

Based on the analysis of research findings and study hypotheses, four of the research hypotheses were not accepted. This is because there was no significant correlation found between self-esteem and various factors, including financial problems, gender, student achievement, and family income group. It is possible that there are several reasons why there is not a strong link between low self-esteem and other things, like money problems, gender, academic success, or family income. For example, people with financial backgrounds might develop coping strategies to deal with financial challenges. While financial problems can undoubtedly be a source of stress, some students may be more resilient and able to manage these challenges without a significant impact on their self-esteem. Thus, in addition, students

with varying levels of academic achievement might still possess similar self-esteem if they excel in other aspects of their lives.

The only significant factor influencing self-esteem was the field of study (Table 6). This aligns with prior research indicating a significant connection between students' self-esteem and their chosen field of study (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). This also underscores that selecting a study program aligned with one's interests can have a profoundly positive impact on a student's success and self-esteem (Neroni et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to these findings, viewed from various aspects. These factors include students' interest in the study program they are about to pursue. Students' interests are subjective and can provide new knowledge to these students, indirectly boosting their self-esteem, which might contribute to the results of the study. Furthermore, aspects of individual competence and mastery, especially among new students, in the field of study they are about to enter often lead to them feeling competent and capable of excelling in it. Success in their courses and assignments in their chosen field can instill a sense of mastery and competence, leading to increased self-esteem. This is also related to the formation of student groups and the identity these new students create. They are more likely to socialize with peers who share similar interests, creating a supportive community. This sense of belonging can have a positive impact on self-esteem, as students feel valued and part of a group that shares their interests. These conditions can significantly affect students, particularly their self-esteem, in terms of motivation, increased resilience, positive self-assessment, and greater confidence. This, in turn, may have a significant impact on the study's findings regarding the influence of the chosen study program on the self-esteem of new university students. Therefore, several approaches to enhancing student self-esteem at the UiTM Pahang Branch will be discussed based on shared experiences and implemented practices.

Table 6: Hypotheses and Summary of Results

	Hypotheses	**Result**
H1	There is a difference in the perception of self-esteem between new students with and without financial difficulties.	H1 is not supported.
H2	There is a difference in the perception of self-esteem between male and female new students.	H2 is not supported.
H3	There is a difference in the new student's self-esteem according to their academic programmes.	H3 is supported.
H4	There is a difference in the new student's self-esteem according to their academic achievement targeted group	H4 is not supported
H5	There is a difference on the new student's self-esteem according to their family income group.	H5 is not supported.

UiTM Pahang Branch's approach to enhancing self-esteem through programs for incoming students has proven effective in achieving these outcomes. Previous studies have shown that new university students' abilities can lessen emotional stress and self-esteem issues (Jun et al., 2013). Therefore, the approach involves academic advisory programs, including the active involvement of lecturers and students, continuing every semester. Face-to-face meetings between students and lecturers are fully utilized, and the integration of value elements is carried

out through these meetings. However, there are no formal modules or references used by lecturers. Instead, the practical approaches of i-DART and ESI UiTM serve as the primary reference sources for lecturers. Constant reminders from the top management of UiTM Pahang Branch to the Heads of Study Centers and communication with college and faculty lecturers are the main ways to show that important results are being achieved, as seen in students' self-esteem.

Additionally, the colleges and faculties at the UiTM Pahang Branch fully implement the incorporation of values into students' education through programs. The University Transformation Division (BTU) has established Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), defining two KPIs for the UiTM Pahang Branch to meet. The distribution of these KPIs is not limited to the Student Affairs Division (BHEP) but extends to the colleges and faculties through value programs implemented annually. Every semester, BHEP and the colleges and faculties monitor the implementation of these programs. The program's approach is diverse and unique, depending on the college or faculty. It involves alumni, corporate figures, and experts in various fields, emphasizing self-management, values, and personal responsibility for students. It is also linked to the challenges and job requirements of industries which students need to understand. Cultivating self-awareness, particularly among new students, is crucial early in their academic journey, as opposed to when students are nearing graduation. Previous studies (Jun et al., 2013; Serap, 2003) have highlighted the significance of students' self-esteem in dealing with stress and self-reliance, particularly among new students, which lends support to this. This is due to the fact that students, as opposed to students who are more mature, can directly practice thinking strategies and acceptance of one's self-worth through experiences.

Furthermore, the emphasis on instilling values through student clubs and program associations also plays a significant role in students' self-esteem. The Student Representative Council (MPP) and College Representation Committees (JPK) are still involved in this approach. They make sure that every activity or program has elements of values that need to be taught. Every program run by clubs and associations should include these value components in its objectives. A supportive environment, which is crucial for boosting students' self-esteem, helps BHEP and student advisors continuously encourage the development of students' self-esteem (Cimino et al., 2013). So, one important part of the activities for the first week of school for new students at the UiTM Pahang Branch is getting them excited about learning through orientation programs that include UiTM's values, especially ESI and i-DART.

Moreover, students' maximum involvement in college and faculty programs, particularly the organization of international and national-level programs, also significantly contributes to the impact of the study program on students' self-identity. Individual student involvement, to some extent, helps enhance students' experiences. This extends beyond managing programs to continuous self-management. It has been shown before that student experiences, involvement, and self-reliance are important in relation to the results of this study (Cimino et al., 2013; Jun et al., 2013; Serap, 2003). Student involvement in innovative programs, for instance, helps improve communication skills between students, lecturers, and the wider community through project management tasks assigned to students. Collaboration also contributes to students' self-esteem by involving them comprehensively in innovative projects. Fostering innovation through student involvement should be continued and improved not only for the excellence of colleges and faculties but also to contribute to the display of students' self-esteem through the opportunities and cooperation demonstrated. Therefore, the top management of the UiTM

Pahang Branch needs to continually promote interest in innovation that consistently enhances students' self-esteem.

The aspect of self-reliance, or standing on one's own two feet, is a concept that has long been practiced to boost an individual's self-esteem. Distinguishing between introverted and extroverted elements clarifies an individual's capacity for self-management to the maximum extent or otherwise. Instilling self-reliance among students as an added value to be embraced in their academic journey at higher education institutions is crucial. Therefore, the emphasis on self-reliance through students' involvement as leaders and deputies in university activities and programs is believed to have an impact on students' self-reliance. This self-involvement is also perpetuated through the mentor-mentee concept, indirectly implemented to assist weaker students within an academic group. This method is used with a focus on the Plan, Do, Check, and Action (PDCA) mechanism by lecturers, colleges, or faculties, which is thought to help students make good decisions about their academic path. In other aspects, universities can provide personalised academic counselling to help students explore and choose study programs that align with their interests and strengths. Academic advisors can guide students in making informed decisions about their field of study, taking into account their passions and career goals. Next, universities shall implement mentorship programs where experienced students or alumni can mentor new students based on their chosen field of study. These mentors can provide guidance, share their experiences, and offer insights into the specific program, creating a sense of belonging and support. Establishing peer support groups within each academic program where students can connect with peers who have similar academic interests may support this initiative. These groups can offer academic assistance, emotional support, and a sense of community. Finally, recognition of achievements refers to the achievements of students within specific programs, whether through awards, scholarships, or other forms of acknowledgment. Highlighting success stories can boost students' self-esteem and motivation.

Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to the literature pertaining to self-esteem among new university students. The results of this study show that academic background has an impact on new university students' self-esteem, which can be at a high level. Based on the study's objectives and findings, it was determined that financial constraints do not affect students' self-esteem. However, from a socio-demographic perspective, specifically regarding the choice of program undertaken by students, this factor has a significant impact on the self-esteem of new students. This contributes to unexpected findings within the scope of this study, and the university management needs to emphasise the appropriate initiatives and approaches, as discussed in the aforementioned section. This result implies that university administrators must continue looking for strategies to help students preserve their positive perception so they can face future life challenges. Some limitations are considered. For instance, the sample was gathered from a single public university and involved only new university students. Therefore, the future challenges in conducting this study include the suggestion to expand and extend the scope of similar research to all higher education institutions in Malaysia. This would provide more extensive and comprehensive data to observe trends related to self-esteem among new students, particularly in Malaysia. The findings from this expanded study are expected to benefit the Ministry of Higher Education by incorporating self-esteem factors into the holistic planning of Malaysia's educational blueprint development for the next five years. Additionally, these findings may also benefit university management in designing various programs related to self-esteem in orientation and continuous motivation programs, as well as developing modules that

could be included as mandatory courses for new students to provide early exposure to building self-esteem at the beginning of their studies. In addition, future work should encompass a comparative analysis between experienced students (senior students) and private university students. Furthermore, universities can consider the recommendations provided in the discussion section to enhance the self-esteem of university students and give it additional attention, especially in the current challenging educational environment.

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