

Urban Suburban Environment in Influencing the Social Emotional Competence among Students: A Comparison

Munirah Ahmad Dahari^{1*}, Nurul Shifa Hassan², Nor Haliza Yaakob¹,
Siti Hajar Norhan¹, Nur Amalina Hasan¹, Nasiha Sakina Saadun³

¹ School of Health Sciences, KPJ Healthcare University, Nilai, Malaysia

² Centre of Global Professional & Social Development, KPJ Healthcare University, Nilai, Malaysia

³ General Studies, KPJ Healthcare College, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: ucn.munirah@kpju.edu.my

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Abstract: *The ability to control and manage emotion when dealing with others is a crucial skill set needed by students to safeguard their self-esteem, create a harmonious educational environment, and maintain social relationships. Such skills should be boundless by the geography in which they study, be it in urban or suburban university. Using the Social Emotional Competency scale, the study investigated the differences between urban and suburban university students on social emotional competency. A group of 359 nursing students from two different universities i.e. urban and suburban participated in the survey. The T-test analysis shows that despite the disparity in location, both groups of students did not differ in terms of social emotional competency. The study emphasised the importance of universal exposure of education on social emotional competency in the university setting.*

Keywords: Urban & Suburban; Social Emotional Competency

1. Introduction

Globalisation, digitalisation and social transformation have remarkably shifted how the younger generation interacts and builds relationships in the current swiftly evolving world. While technological developments have enhanced connectivity, they have also created challenges that affect the quality of interpersonal communication. Online interactions, although convenient, can diminish the quality of face-to-face communication, which remains essential for meaningful social connection (Seidman, 2024).

Social emotional skills refer to an individual's ability to recognise and manage emotions, demonstrate care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations constructively (Wang et al., 2025; Xiong & Zhou, 2025). These skills have progressively been identified as an essential aspect of students' holistic development in higher education. University students, in particular, face emotional, academic, and social transitions that demand strong socio-emotional skills to foster resilience, adaptability, and academic success (Postareff et al., 2017). A lack of these skills can lead to communication discrepancies and misunderstandings in everyday interactions.

One of the key benefits of social emotional learning (SEL) is the cultivation of healthy social skills that contribute to success in both personal and professional life. Weissberg et al. (2015)

noted that emphasising social emotional skills yields both short and long-term benefits, including reduced emotional distress, improved academic performance, enhanced social behaviour, stronger relationships, and fewer conduct problems in the short term, as well as reduced criminal behaviour, healthier relationships, career readiness, and greater civic engagement in the long term.

Among the various factors influencing social emotional competency, the educational environment has become the central focus of this study. In this context, urban university students refer to those enrolled in institutions located in highly populated metropolitan areas, commonly characterised by cultural diversity, extensive access to resources, and exposure to fast-paced environments. These universities often serve large and diverse student bodies and may face challenges such as overcrowding, limited student-teacher interaction, and heightened stress levels due to academic and social competition.

In contrast, suburban university students are those studying at institutions situated in less populated areas, often on the outskirts of major cities. These universities tend to offer a more community-oriented atmosphere, with smaller class sizes, closer student-teacher relationships, and a more relaxed pace of life. Such environments can positively influence students' emotional well-being and interpersonal development.

In both urban and suburban university settings, these factors may manifest distinctly due to variations in infrastructure, demographics of students, diversity in culture, and accessible resources. Urban universities, for instance, may provide a larger range of SEL programmes and support services but also face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, higher stress, and limited individual attention, all of which can affect students' emotional well-being and relationship-building. Suburban universities, on the other hand, often foster a more integrated and supportive community atmosphere that encourages stronger interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging. The teaching environment in suburban institutions is generally perceived as more personalised, with greater opportunities for student-teacher interaction, which is a core factor in nurturing socio-emotional competence.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of SEL initiatives in both urban and suburban contexts depends on how well these programmes are embedded within the academic and social fabric of the institution. When SEL is effectively integrated into the curriculum and supported by trained educators, students are leaning towards developing the emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills necessary for academic success and personal growth.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Social emotional skills' development is often grounded in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, which identifies five key domains that include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are associated with positive emotional regulation, enhanced academic performance, and reduced behavioural problems (CASEL, 2025). Social Cognitive Theory, as developed by Bandura (1986), further supports this perspective, suggesting that social emotional skills are learned through observation, modelling, and social interaction within one's environment. Therefore, environmental factors such as contexts, either urban or suburban, play an essential role in shaping social emotional development of an individual.

Social Emotional Skills in University Settings

Research indicates that students with higher levels of social emotional skills exhibit greater psychological well-being, improved stress management, and stronger academic motivation (Elias, 2003). Universities that integrate social and emotional learning into their curriculum tend to produce graduates with stronger interpersonal skills, adaptability, and employability (Durlak et al., 2011). However, the extent of social emotional development may vary depending on social and environmental factors, such as access to resources, exposure to diversity, and the quality of learning experiences. A supportive institutional culture that values collaboration, empathy, and reflection has been shown to enhance students' capacity to regulate emotions and build meaningful social connections.

Urban versus Suburban Contexts

Urban universities often provide students with greater exposure to multicultural interactions, advanced facilities, and structured co-curricular programmes that promote social emotional development (Perzigian, 2018). Students in these settings may demonstrate stronger social awareness and adaptability due to frequent interactions with individuals from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Conversely, suburban university students may experience a more close-knit community environment that supports stronger relationship-building and a greater sense of belonging, but may limit exposure to diversity and complex emotional challenges (Ahmad Feisal & Singh, 2025).

Furthermore, socioeconomic and infrastructural discrepancy between urban and suburban areas can influence students' emotional well-being and access to social emotional learning (SEL) programmes. Urban students often report higher stress levels due to competitive academic environments and higher living costs, while suburban students may face limited access to mental health support and personal development opportunities (Kuo et al., 2020). Hence, both environments offer unique strengths and limitations in fostering social and emotional growth.

Research Gaps and Implications

While prior research highlights the importance of social emotional skills in education, comparative studies focusing on university students across urban and suburban contexts remain limited. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on school-level populations or examined specific dimensions of social emotional skills such as emotional regulation and empathy (Santos et al., 2023). There is a pressing need to explore how contextual factors, such as parental involvement, campus culture, social networks, and exposure to diversity, shape social emotional development among university students in different geographical settings.

Understanding these contextual influences will help higher education institutions design tailored interventions to strengthen emotional resilience, social connectedness, and holistic student development. By identifying how environmental factors interact with institutional culture, universities can create inclusive learning environments that support both academic achievement and emotional well-being across diverse student populations.

3. Research Methodology

A set of questionnaires consisting of demographic background items and the Social Emotional Competency Questionnaire (SECQ) was distributed to both diploma and bachelor's degree nursing students from two geographically distinct private universities. A total of 359 students participated in the study.

The SECQ consists of five domains; self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management and responsible decision making. Participants were required to respond on a six-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all true with me” (1) to “Very true of me” (6). The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .71, .78, .76, .73 and .79, for self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management and responsible decision-making, respectively (Zhou & Ee, 2012).

4. Result

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Respondents’ demography

Items	Information	N	%
Gender	Male	28	10.8
	Female	331	92.2
Location of university	Urban	204	56.8
	Suburban	155	43.2

Table 1 indicates the demographic background information of the participants. Female participation was particularly higher than that of males, with 331 female and 28 male respondents. Among the 359 participants, 56.8% were from the urban university, while the remaining 43.2% were from the suburban university.

4.2 Objective: Social Emotional Competency among Urban and Suburban University Students

Table 2: Comparison in Social Emotional Competency among Urban & Suburban Students

Group	M	SD	t	df	p
Urban University	106.94	22.22	-.792	360	.429
Suburban University	105.22	17.92			

The independent *t*-test analysis in Table 4.2 above shows that there was no significant difference in social emotional competency between urban and suburban students ($p = .429$). The urban university students recorded a mean score of $M = 106.94$, $SD = 22.22$, while the suburban university students recorded $M = 105.22$, $SD = 17.92$. This indicates that students’ abilities in self-management, emotional regulation, self-awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making were not significantly influenced by the type of university, whether urban or suburban.

Discussion

The study indicates no significant difference in social emotional competency among urban and suburban students. This finding is consistent with a number of previous studies in related fields. Bhat and Chahal (2023) emphasised the similarities rather than differences between both geographical settings in terms of socio-emotional competency, except for the dimension of self-management, where students in urban areas scored slightly but significantly higher. Likewise, Gordon et al. (2022) found that social emotional competency is equally emphasised

across both urban and suburban contexts, suggesting that such competencies are not bound by geographical location.

A possible explanation for this non-significant difference is that both urban and suburban universities share similar educational structures and exposures, despite their geographical distinctions. They are both guided by the same national education policy and offer comparable programmes that include foundational subjects such as *Penghayatan Etika dan Peradaban* and *Community Service*. Furthermore, students from both settings are actively engaged in curricular and co-curricular activities that promote social interaction, teamwork, and emotional growth.

Therefore, regardless of geographical differences, the uniformity in curriculum design, educational philosophy, and institutional environment likely contributes to comparable levels of social emotional competency among students. The emphasis on collaboration, empathy, and ethical values within university life supports the holistic development of students across both urban and suburban settings.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the differences in social emotional competency between urban and suburban university students. The findings revealed no significant difference between the two groups, indicating that geographical location does not play a determining role in shaping students' social emotional skills. This outcome supports prior research suggesting that social emotional competencies are influenced more by institutional practices, curriculum design, and educational experiences than by the surrounding environment.

Both urban and suburban universities in Malaysia operate under the same national education framework, which emphasises holistic student development through academic, ethical, and community-based learning. Shared exposure to similar subjects, such as *Penghayatan Etika dan Peradaban* and *Community Service*, as well as active participation in co-curricular activities, may have contributed to students developing comparable levels of self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The results highlight the importance of integrating social emotional learning (SEL) systematically across all higher education institutions, regardless of their geographical context. By embedding SEL into the curriculum and promoting supportive environments, universities can continue to nurture emotionally intelligent, empathetic, and resilient graduates.

Future research could expand on this study by exploring other demographic and psychological variables, such as socioeconomic background, academic discipline, or family support, to gain a deeper understanding of how these factors interact with social emotional competency. Longitudinal or qualitative approaches may also provide richer insights into how students' emotional and social growth evolves throughout their university experience.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or the writing of this paper.

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