

e-Proceedings

2024
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**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
ON ACCOUNTING
& BUSINESS**

Ethics and Integrity in Accounting and Business: Building Trust in an Intricate World

ORGANISED BY:

**FACULTY OF ACCOUNTANCY, UiTM PERAK BRANCH
TAPAH CAMPUS**

In Collaboration With

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON ACCOUNTING AND BUSINESS

(ICAB2024)

Ethics and Integrity in Accounting and Business: Building Trust in an Intricate World

e ISBN 978-967-2776-35-2

FACULTY OF ACCOUNTANCY
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA, PERAK BRANCH, TAPAH CAMPUS, MALAYSIA

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing in Publication Data

No e-ISBN: 978-967-2776-35-2

Cover Design: Graphic Design and Web Page Team
Typesetting : ICAB 2024 Proceeding Team

Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Accounting Undergraduates After the Pandemic of Covid-19

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the potential increase in depression, anxiety, and stress among 157 accounting undergraduates following the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the main changes was the reintroduction of face-to-face learning mode replacing online and distant learning. The abolishment of movement control order also enabled them to have an active life style such as exercising in open places. Additionally, many Malaysians faced financial issues due to Covid 19 such as being terminated from their employment. A digital survey was utilized to gather data from diploma-level accounting undergraduates at UiTM Perak Branch. The survey adapted the DASS21 questionnaire as per administered by Ministry of Health. The results indicated that despite these changes, the samples' level of depression, anxiety, and stress among the participants was comparatively low and remained to have a sedentary life style. One possible reason for this outcome was that undergraduates experiencing these mental health issues had already been granted special leave and were therefore not included in the sample. Furthermore, financial assistance in the form of scholarships, grants, and zakat helped undergraduates facing financial difficulties.

Keywords

DASS21, Accounting Undergraduates, Financial Difficulties, Pandemic, Covid-19

1.0 Introduction

The pandemic of Covid-19 caused many changes in our lives globally. Many countries adopted movement control orders (MCO) over a period to control the spread of its virus. As a result, large gatherings were not permitted, including face-to-face academic sessions (F2F). As an alternative, open-and-distance learning (ODL) was introduced to avoid any disruption in academic sessions. Now, vaccination against Covid-19 has proven a success in controlling the pandemic. Due to this, F2F is being reintroduced in public universities of Malaysia replacing ODL. Behnoudi (2005) stated that when an individual needs to make a readjustment due to new conditions or situations, he is facing stress (cited in Shahvarani et al., 2015) as well other related mental illness such as depression and anxiety. Therefore, there is a possibility that the reintroduction of F2F mode may cause mental illness among the undergraduates.

Previous studies showed that undergraduates who had poor financial backgrounds (Choon et al., 2015 and Islam et al., 2018), younger and females (Das and Krishan, 2022) were more prone to depression, anxiety, and stress. Other characteristics identified were undergraduates who lower mental, social, or spiritual scores (Das and Krishan, 2022). Those with less self-compassion and having a negative attitude towards mental health were also among the factors of higher depression, anxiety, and stress (Das and Krishan, 2022).

Finally, Malays were also found to be more depressive and anxious as compared to other counterparts of other races (Choon et al., 2015).

Due to the findings of past research, it is reasonable to perform a study on depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduates of a public university. This is due to the reasons that the number of female undergraduates is higher in the Faculty of Accountancy of UiTM Perak and the mode of learning is changed from ODL to F2F. Additionally, many parents are also affected economically due to Covid-19; some were retrenched from their employment or suffered a huge loss in their businesses. Finally, UiTM undergraduates for diploma courses are restricted to Bumiputra which is predominantly by Malays.

This study has several limitations. First, this is a preliminary study which data is only presented in frequency and no hypothesis is drawn. Secondly, the data is obtained only from one semester in the year of 2022. Thirdly, the data is obtained only from one faculty of UiTM Perak and thus the number of samples is relatively small.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Outcomes on the Shift of Learning Modes

The reintroduction of F2F mode after the implementation of ODL due to MCO caused undergraduates to adapt to changes in their learning mode. As stated by Behnoudi (2005), when an individual needs to make a readjustment due to new conditions or situations, he is facing stress (cited in Shahvarani et al., 2015). Thus, undergraduates had to unlearn and learn different modes of learning due to the imposition and abolishment of MCO.

Both ODL and F2F learning methods have their own characteristic. Dung (2020) discussed his findings of his study in Vietnam. Firstly, ODL provided a protection against Covid-19 due to minimised social interactions during MCO. ODL also saved time (and thus cost) because both lecturers/teachers and undergraduates did not have to travel. However, ODL requires a good internet coverage and suitable devices. The top two devices being used in Dung's findings were smartphones and laptop. This limited the lecturers/teachers only to provide their undergraduates short and simple assessments. Additionally prolonged use of devices in ODL might caused eye strains and lack of physical movement. ODL also had caused social interactions with peer to be disrupted and finally creating the sense of isolation (Hussin et al., 2021).

Mohd Isa et al. (2022) reported another disadvantage of ODL. Undergraduates faced a number of distractions such as parents' expectation on them to be involved in house chores. Therefore, in order to have a better focus on their studies, they normally complete their academic tasks late at night. However, this caused lack of rest and be sleepy in online classes during the day.

After the abolishment of MCO, the F2F learning mode was reintroduced. Hence, undergraduates had to relearn the F2F mode of learning such as time management and punctuality, as well as interactions between peers and lecturers. Up to this date, there is lack of studies on the outcomes of the reintroduction of F2F learning mode.

2.2 Sense of Competition in F2F Learning Mode

The augmented academic workload, the requirement for rote learning, difficulties in managing time, intensified performance expectations, and psychological elements collectively add to the stress associated with this shift. Nevertheless, educators can assist by imparting instruction on efficient study techniques, extending assistance, and establishing a nurturing learning atmosphere to facilitate this shift.

Taking into consideration the psychological and emotional aspects, the pressure to perform well in a F2F setting can result in heightened worry and tension, which in turn can have an impact on one's ability to concentrate and study effectively. In addition, the worry of failing due to inadequate preparation might become more acute, which can contribute to increased levels of stress.

Comparing oneself to others and experiencing additional stress might be the result of studying in a competitive setting where other undergraduates are also preparing for the same examinations. In spite of the fact that it has the potential to foster a healthy level of competitiveness among undergraduates, it has been found that some of the perceived competition in the classroom is connected with increased daily imposter feelings among all undergraduates, but particularly those undergraduates who excel in the study. In response, undergraduates' sentiments of imposter syndrome predicted their participation in the course at the conclusion of the term, attendance, intentions to drop out, and grades in the course. (Elizabeth A. Canning, 2019) As undergraduates negotiate diverse study speeds and methods, the transition from solo, resource-based study to group study sessions can also contribute to the stress that they are experiencing.

2.3 Environment and Logistics

Most of the cases, undergraduates will reside in colleges or stay with their family home. When F2F study mode is reintroduced, most of undergraduates will reside in college as compared to stay with their family. According to Fawzy and A. Hamed (2017), undergraduates who resided in college has a higher level of depression, anxiety and stress. Yet, later studies provided a contradict finding in which undergraduates who reside with their families had a higher DASS due to unsupportive environment such as lack of personal space and noisy environment. As a result, these distractions had adversely affected the process of learning (El Nahas et al., 2021 and Mohamed Ibrahim et al., 2023).

2.4 Physical activities

Keeping up a good health is important among undergraduates in order to avoid any disruption in learning. Although vaccination had proven to be effective in curbing Covid-19, other health issues may emerge due to MCO. Lack of physical activities during the implementation of ODL (Dung, 2020) had caused obesity among Malaysians (Tan et al., 2022). Tan et al reported slightly more than half of young adults in Malaysia had an increase in their body weight by 1.28 ± 0.60 kg. However, Chin et al. (2022) reported a mixed finding in their study performed locally; 32.2% of their samples lost weight during MCO while the other 30.7% had an increase in their body weight. Lim et al. (2022) however showed no changes in body weight among Malaysians of B40 group. Although they had become less active physically during MCO, their diet had improved markedly by consuming more home cooking and less fast food.

Therefore, research question of this study is what is the level of depression, anxiety and stress among the accounting undergraduates of UiTM Perak when ODL is abolished and the F2F learning mode is reintroduced?

3.0 Methods

3.1 Sample

The population of the study was undergraduates of accounting in UiTM Perak for the semester of February-July 2023. Both undergraduates of Diploma in Accountancy and Diploma in Accounting (DIA) and Information System (DAIS) were involved in this study. However, undergraduates who already granted special leave were excluded. Among the reasons for the special leave were due to medical issues such as depression and anxiety and other medical problems such as epilepsy, financial problems or other personal problems. Therefore, only 157 undergraduates from all year of study took part in the survey. The sampling method used was convenience sampling.

3.2 Data collection

A digital survey was adapted from DASS21 survey to measure the participants' level of anxiety and stress. Additionally, information pertaining the samples' background was also collected. Such information included their personal and financial background, academic performance and study preferences. The questionnaire utilized a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "Strongly Disagree" (SD), 2 represented "Disagree" (D), 3 represented "Agree" (A), and 4 represented "Strongly Agree" (SA). The undergraduates' responses were recorded and analyzed using IBM SPSS 26 software and Microsoft Excel.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive analysis

The mean score was obtained by computing the average of all items within each variable to assess the level of Depression Anxiety Stress Tess (DASS21) and the samples' background by referring the parallelity level in Table 1 that classified into five levels of academic stresses from high (3.50- 4.49) to very low (1.00-1.49) (Omar et al., 2019).

Table 1: Parallelity Level

Mean score interval	Parallelity level
3.50 – 4.49	High
2.50 – 3.49	Moderate
1.50 – 2.49	Low
1.00 – 1.49	Very Low

Table 2 presented the frequency and percentage of variables related to the respondents' background. The majority of respondents were female, accounting for 79.6% (125), while the remaining 20.4% (32) were male. In terms of age group, the distribution was almost equal, with 50.3% (79) aged below 20 years and 49.7% (78) aged 20 years and above. Regarding courses, 90.4% (142) were from DIA, and the remaining 9.6% (15) were from DAIS. Semester distribution revealed that 47.1% (74) of respondents were from semester 1, followed by semester 5, 3, 2, and 4, accounting for 24.8% (39), 14.6% (23), 10.8% (17), and 2.5% (4) respectively. Current CGPA was not applicable for the majority, as 47.1% (74) were from semester 1. Most respondents achieved dean's list status with a CGPA between 3.5 and 4, comprising 34.4% (54), while 10.8% (17) had a CGPA between 3.00 and 3.49, 4.5% (7) had a CGPA between 2.50 and 2.99, and only 3.2% (5) had a CGPA below 2.5. The study found that 68.8% (108) of respondents were residents and 31.2% (49) were non-residents.

Regarding parents' marital status, the majority had parents who were still married, accounting for 82.8% (130). The remaining percentages were 11.5% (18) for divorced, 1.9% (3) for separated or deceased parents, 1.3% (2) for polygamous parents, and 0.6% (1) with unknown marital status. Most respondents were not the eldest in their families, representing 70.7% (111), while 29.3% (46) were the eldest. In terms of household income, 51% (80) reported earning less than RM4851, 34.4% (54) reported earning between RM4,851 and RM10,970, and 14.6% (23) reported earning more than RM10,970. The findings also indicated that 51% (80) of respondents received money from a guardian, 46.5% (73) received funds from grants, scholarships, or zakat, and only 2.5% (4) used their personal savings to finance their studies. Moreover, 86.6% of respondents had part-time jobs, while 1.4% (20) did not require one. The majority, 65% (102), reported managing their expenses within their income or allowance, while 35% (55) did not. More than half, 59.2% (93), claimed to be able to manage their money well, while the remaining 40.8% (64) did not.

In terms of health, the study revealed that 98.1% (154) of respondents are healthy, while 1.9% (3) have chronic health conditions that require ongoing medical care. The distribution between those who engaged in regular exercise and those who did not was almost balanced, with 49.7% (78) and 50.3% (78) respectively. When asked about fatigue, 63.1% (99) of respondents stated that they easily get tired, while the remaining 36.9% (58) did not.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Respondent's Background

Respondent's background	Level of variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	32	20.4
	Female	125	79.6
Age group (years old)	Below 20	79	50.3
	20 and above	78	49.7
Course	DIA	142	90.4
	DAIS	15	9.6
Semester	1	74	47.1
	2	17	10.8
	3	23	14.6
	4	4	2.5
	5	39	24.8
Current CGPA	Below 2.50	5	3.2
	2.50 – 2.99	7	4.5
	3.00-3.49	17	10.8
	3.5-4.00	54	34.4
	Not applicable (for Sem 01 undergraduates)	74	47.1
Place of residence	Resident	108	68.8
	Non-resident	49	31.2
Parent's Marital status	Still married	130	82.8
	Separated	3	1.9
	Divorced	18	11.5
	Polygamous	2	1.3
	Dead	3	1.9
	Unknown	1	0.6
	Eldest child	Yes	46
No	111	70.7	
Household income	Less than RM4,851	80	51.0

	RM4,851 – RM10,970	54	34.4
	More than RM10,970	23	14.6
Financial sources	Guardian	80	51.0
	Grant, scholarship or zakat	73	46.5
	Personal saving	4	2.5
Part time job needed	Yes	136	86.6
	No	21	13.4
Necessities expenses limit	Yes	102	65.0
	No	55	35.0
Good money management	Yes	93	59.2
	No	64	40.8
Chronic health care needed	Yes	3	1.9
	No	154	98.1
Regular exercise	Yes	78	49.7
	No	79	50.3
Easily tired	Yes	99	63.1
	No	58	36.9

Table 3 presents the mean score for the Study Style construct. The findings reveal that the respondents displayed an average level in terms of their study group preference, ability to focus during lectures, comfort in asking questions during lectures or tutorials, note preparation, engagement in extra exercises for challenging subjects, organization of learning materials, seeking help when needed, and meeting assignment deadlines. However, the respondents showed a low preference for studying online and had a tendency to procrastinate.

Table 3: Mean Score of Study Style

Item code	Item	SD (1)	D (2)	A (3)	SA (4)	Score Mean	Parallellity Level
S_Q1	I would prefer to study in groups rather than alone.	11	47	72	27	2.73	Moderate
S_Q2	I would prefer online classes rather than physical classes.	44	58	36	19	2.19	Low
S_Q3	I am able to focus during lectures	10	18	97	32	2.96	Moderate
S_Q4	I make it a habit to avoid procrastination.	19	68	53	17	2.43	Low
S_Q5	I feel comfortable asking questions during lectures or tutorials.	10	64	72	11	2.54	Moderate
S_Q6	I prepare my own notes according to my own needs.	14	20	81	42	2.96	Moderate
S_Q7	I do extra exercises for subjects that I find difficult.	6	23	91	37	3.01	Moderate
S_Q8	I organize my learning materials accordingly.	11	24	80	42	2.97	Moderate
S_Q9	I seek help from my lecturers or friends if needed.	2	11	79	65	3.32	Moderate
S_Q10	I am able to meet deadlines for all assignments.	0	13	75	69	3.36	Moderate

Table 4 presents the mean score of the Depression Anxiety Stress Tess (DASS21). The respondents showed a moderate level of agreement with the statement regarding being worried about situations that could lead to panic and feeling embarrassed. The findings revealed that most of the respondents reported a low level

of depression, anxiety, and stress according to the DASS21. This includes experiencing difficulty in unwinding, being aware of dryness in the mouth, a lack of positive feelings, breathing difficulties, struggling to find motivation to initiate tasks, tending to overreact to situations, trembling, excessive nervous energy, a sense of hopelessness, becoming easily agitated, having difficulty relaxing, feeling sad and dejected, being intolerant of anything that interferes with their activities, feeling on the verge of panic, lacking enthusiasm for anything, feeling a lack of self-worth, being easily irritable, being aware of their heart's action even without physical exertion, experiencing unfounded fear, and perceiving life as meaningless.

Table 4: Mean score of Depression Anxiety Stress TESS (DASS21)

Item code	Item	SD (1)	D (2)	A (3)	SA (4)	Score Mean	Parallellity Level
D_Q1	I found it hard to wind down.	29	98	22	8	2.06	Low
D_Q2	I was aware of dryness of my mouth.	32	56	41	28	2.41	Low
D_Q3	I could not seem to experience any positive feeling at all.	59	67	28	3	1.84	Low
D_Q4	I experienced breathing difficulty eg. Excessively rapid breathing, 541 reathlessness absenced of physical exertion).	84	37	28	8	1.75	Low
D_Q5	I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things.	42	76	35	4	2.01	Low
D_Q6	I tended to over-react to situations.	40	63	38	16	2.19	Low
D_Q7	I experienced trembling eg. In the hands).	50	52	41	14	2.12	Low
D_Q8	I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy.	33	55	48	21	2.36	Low
D_Q9	I was worried about situations in which might panic and make a fool of myself.	31	50	40	36	2.52	Moderate
D_Q10	I felt that I had nothing to look forward to.	56	68	21	12	1.93	Low
D_Q11	I found myself getting agitated.	56	65	26	10	1.94	Low
D_Q12	I found difficult to relax.	46	71	29	11	2.03	Low
D_Q13	I felt down-hearted and blue.	58	67	25	7	1.88	Low
D_Q14	I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing.	53	73	25	6	1.90	Low
D_Q15	I felt I was close to panic.	52	60	35	10	2.02	Low
D_Q16	I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything.	52	73	29	3	1.89	Low
D_Q17	I felt I was not worth much as a person.	53	65	20	19	2.03	Low
D_Q18	I felt that I was rather touchy.	46	70	31	10	2.03	Low
D_Q19	I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (eg. Sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat).	51	59	36	11	2.04	Low
D_Q20	I felt scared without any good reason.	41	72	26	18	2.13	Low
D_Q21	I felt that life was meaningless.	85	51	21	0	1.59	Low

Overall, the significant findings showed that the level of anxiety and stress among the participants was low due to several reasons. Firstly, undergraduates with health and personal problems who already granted special leave were excluded from the sample. Therefore, the sample only consist of undergraduates with higher probability of least problems.

Secondly, the fact that majority of them were from the families of B40 class of income, this factor did not cause a high level of depression, anxiety and stress among the samples once the mode of study changed from ODL to F2F. The plausible explanations were financial aids obtained (grant, scholarship or zakat) and being provided logistics in campus helped them to overcome their financial problems. Additionally, their side income from part-time working and their self-financial literacy also minimize this financial problem.

Thirdly, the samples showed that their preference for F2F mode over ODL was higher as per items in Table 3. Being able to have F2F lectures and peer discussion caused an increase in their focus in learning and a reduction in procrastination. The shift of assessments from open-book to close-book mode was not a problem to the samples as their self-efficacy in study was also at a moderate level as they prepared and organized their learning materials accordingly as well as willing to do extra exercises.

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out due to the fact that there was a possibility of higher depression, anxiety and stress among the accounting undergraduates of UiTM Perak after the reintroduction of F2F mode learning and facing the impacts of post Covid 19 pandemic. Data were collected using a digital survey from accounting undergraduates of UiTM Perak at diploma level. The survey adapted the DASS21 questionnaire. Findings showed that despite such changes, the level of depression, anxiety and stress among the samples were relatively low. Among possible explanations for this finding were undergraduates who had depression, anxiety and stress had already granted special leave, hence excluded from the samples. Additionally, financial aids obtained for undergraduates with financial problems such as scholarship, grant and zakat had helped them.

Acknowledgement

This research was conducted under the Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Tapah Campus, Perak, Malaysia. We would like to acknowledge all the faculty members for their cooperation in the process of data collection. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all who have contributed for this paper.

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Surat kami : 700-KPK (PRP.UP.1/20/1)

Tarikh : 20 Januari 2023

Prof. Madya Dr. Nur Hisham Ibrahim
Rektor
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Cawangan Perak



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