

# PERCEIVED STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY IN UiTM SARAWAK

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the education industry in many ways. Most notably is the shift from in-person educational systems to online and distance learning (ODL). ODL is defined as the use of a variety of platforms that provide education over computer networks, including the internet, email, chat, new groups and messages, and video and audio conferencing (Dhull & Arora, 2019). Even though ODL is not new in higher education, the sudden shift to full ODL has caused issues with not just educators, but also impacted the students intensely. Students claim that the stress is caused by academic, financial, and personal issues, such as their ability to cope with technologies, adequate home facilities for online learning, or consistent internet access especially those in the rural areas (Sahu, 2020). Such burdens can have negative consequences for students' learning and mental health where students may experience lower study motivation, increased independent learning stresses, lack of daily routine which possibly led to higher dropout rates (Wickens, 2011).

It was reported in Malaysia that many students have experienced frustration with the online learning mode due to stress, as lecturers seem to delegate more tasks in the e-learning mode as compared to in actual class (Palansamy, 2020). Not only that, but internet connections have also been one of the major problems during ODL where students living in rural areas will have difficulties in attending online lectures and completing their online assessments (Lim, 2020). This was also proven in a study done by Sahu (2020), where it found that students faced difficulty coping with online mode. This includes a student's ability to cope with technologies, adequate home facilities for online learning, or consistent internet access especially those who live in the rural areas.

Other than that, having an uncondusive learning environment such as uncomfortable and small studying space, poor sitting and noise distraction, and not having the right gadgets such as laptops may cause students to be demotivated to study which may cause perceived stress to increase. Thus, students' tendency to drop some of their subjects in their current semester is high due to stress where their semester will be extended (Lim, 2020).

Therefore, based on these studies, we have decided to propose this study to identify the perceived stress among undergraduate university students during online distance learning in UiTM Sarawak as well as the factors that contribute to stress among undergraduate university students during online learning. It is pertinent to pinpoint these factors as it will provide a better picture of students enrolled in UiTM Sarawak as many may have different issues to deal with, those residing in rural areas in this state.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived stress among undergraduate university students during ODL in UiTM Sarawak. The study suggests several research objectives be attained as follows: -

- i) To identify the perceived stress among undergraduate students in UiTM Sarawak during ODL
- ii) To examine whether there are differences in perceived stress across age
- iii) To examine whether there are differences in perceived stress across gender
- iv) To identify the perceived stress among students based on their education enrolment

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Perceived Stress

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen in 1983. It assesses stress by asking a series of questions about people's experiences and emotions during the previous month, as well as how intense people experienced them. It assists in identifying how frequently people have been experiencing excessive levels of stress and putting their health in danger (Cohen, 1994). This study will be adapting the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) by Cohen (1983), to measure the stress among undergraduate university students. The scale consists of ten questions that are used to measure the perception of stress experienced by the respondent over the past month. Based on this scale, total mean scores of 0–13 are low stress, 14–26 indicate moderate stress and 27–40 indicate high stress.

### 3.2 COVID-19 Associated Stress

Rapid growth in COVID-19 cases around the world has created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what will happen. It has also caused significant stress within the university community, including students. This stress will harm students' learning and mental health. Similar findings were also found in a study by Kafka (2020), that pointed out that COVID-19 has made a huge impact on the lives of the people affected by it. There are various stressors identified as contributing to an increase of anxiety that led to stress to not only the people but also to the community of the university especially the students. A study by Son et al. (2020), found that 70% of respondents showed an increase in stress and anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The unexpected cancellation of face-to-face lessons during the Covid-19 outbreak has increased students' perceived stress. This is because, during ODL, students may have difficulties in adjusting to the utilisation of online teaching lectures or tutorials. According to Palansamy (2020), many students in Malaysia have expressed their frustration with the online learning mode due to stress, as lecturers seem to delegate more tasks in the e-learning mode as compared to in actual class. This is because as universities quickly adopted remote online courses, most professors continued using the same syllabuses and learning outcomes designed for face-to-face instruction which do not work well for students as they were overburdened with constant alternate tests, adding to their stress and anxiety.

Another study related to this by Sundarasan et al. (2020) in which 983 students were sampled, found that 20.4 %, 6.6%, and 2.8% had minimal to moderate, marked to severe, and most extreme levels of anxiety respectively. Many students have experienced anxiety during this COVID-19 pandemic due to the changes in the education system which has placed

unprecedented mental health pressure on students by increasing academic demands in a community with excessive pre-existing levels of stress and a potentially reduced capacity to focus on traditional coping mechanisms, such as families that may be experiencing heightened anxiety, which requires rapid observation and care.

### 3.3 Demographic Factors

AlAteeq, Aljhani, and AlEesa (2020) have shown that infectious outbreaks affect people's mental health and well-being. Several risk factors were taken into consideration. Most respondents were female (74.7%) and secondary school (79.8%) students. More than half of the individuals, 55%, had moderate levels of stress, while 30.2% had high levels. It also showed that females and university students are at a high risk of experiencing psychological distress. Furthermore, according to the study done by Monteiro, Balogun, and Oratile (2014) in Botswana, found that older adults and younger adults cope with tension in various ways. The age at which students view stress varies depending on their own life experiences, such as obstacles they have overcome that have caused them to become used to stress as they get older.

A study by Manap, Hamid, and Ghani (2019) on depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students in one private college in Malaysia mentioned that not only do university students face challenges in their academic pursuits but they must also strike a balance between their academic and family responsibilities. Plus, the students are transitioning from adolescence to maturity at this time, which may be one of the most stressful times of their lives. Meanwhile, another important demographic factor that could affect stress levels is gender. In comparing students based on gender, female students were more likely to experience anxiety. Females tend to display feelings more than males, and the recent pandemic may have accelerated this trend due to a lack of coping mechanisms during times of uncertainty and stress. In a study conducted in China on the effects of gender, educational level, and personality on online learning in a public university, Yu (2021) revealed that most women (>80%) indicated that they favoured a structured learning process but unfavourable online learning solution, while most men (>85%) favoured the online learning process over the typical face-to-face process mainly because the former was far more accessible. Therefore, this shows how much the female feel more affected by the online distance learning where they would easily get stress and anxiety.

Furthermore, Yu's study also discovered that undergraduate students were easily deceived by the idea of online learning. This is because the undergraduates see online learning as a negative alternative made during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research concluded that the undergraduates may have been entertaining themselves by surfing the internet or interacting with their peers instead of being in an online class and paying more attention during the learning process to cope with their stress during online learning. Not only that, but the undergraduates also voiced out that they were more comfortable in having face-to-face classes where they would have higher learning outcomes than having online learning. A study done in Malaysia by Yeo and Yap (2020) found that when compared to students in subsequent years of study, first-year undergraduates were shown to have the greatest degree of felt stress. The results revealed that the measurement model was operating at an appropriate level.

In addition to that, the findings from a study on anxiety among Malaysian university students during the COVID-19 pandemic by Sundarasan et al. (2020), showed that male students are not likely to experience anxiety as compared to female students. This is because females tend to express their emotions more than males, and the current pandemic may have

worsened this trend. This may be due to women's uncertainty tolerance threshold being lower than men's, and exceeding it causes unnecessary tension and worry. In times of uncertainty and stress, female students may have fewer coping methods than male students. As the anxiety increases, it may lead to an increase in stress as well among the students.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Data will be collected via a survey to analyse the perceived stress among undergraduate university students in UiTM Sarawak during ODL. The instrument employed for data collection for this study will be a questionnaire that is distributed using Google Form through various social media. Our targeted respondents are undergraduate students in UiTM Sarawak which includes the Samarahan Campus, Samarahan 2 Campus, and Mukah Campus. The population of undergraduate students in UiTM Sarawak stands at 7974 (Source: HEA UiTM Sarawak). For this study, the Stratified Random Sampling technique will be applied. This method divides the sample size into similar qualities and strata, using a basic random sampling and non-proportional technique selected within each stratum. In this context, the strata would be the campuses. From the population size, a sample of 367 respondents was determined by adapting the Krejcie and Morgan table (1970). The targeted sample size according to campuses will be categorized as such; 210 students from Samarahan Campus, 123 students from Samarahan 2 Campus, and 34 students from Mukah Campus. The rationale of using the stratified random sampling technique is because it enables the researchers to obtain a sample population that best represents the entire population being studied, making sure that each subgroup of interest is represented. The data analysis for each research objective is as follows:

Research Objectives	Types of Analysis
To identify the perceived stress among undergraduate university students in UiTM Sarawak during online distance learning	Mean and Standard Deviation
To examine whether there are differences in stress across age	One-way ANOVA
To identify the stress among students based on their education enrollment	One-way ANOVA
To examine whether there are differences in stress across gender	Independent T-test

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Even though ample studies have been conducted regarding the impacts of shifting to online learning, there are still few surveys that have been made on the impact of COVID-19 on university students during ODL in Sarawak. Thus, the findings could be used as a baseline and will benefit the student, researchers, institution, as well as community for the advancement of knowledge and future practices. At the same time, this study could provide insight to institutions of higher learning on how to better manage and handle students' affairs. After all, our education system must be adaptive to any changing conditions it might face.

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